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The nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland through the eyes of local practitioners

Item Type	Thesis or dissertation
Authors	Warnock, Helen Jane
Citation	Warnock, H. J. (2020). The nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland through the eyes of local practitioners. (Doctoral dissertation). University of Chester, United Kingdom.
Publisher	University of Chester
Rights	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-05-19 04:38:20
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Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10034/623388

**THE NATURE OF YOUTH MINISTRY IN
NORTHERN IRELAND THROUGH THE EYES OF
LOCAL PRACTITIONERS**

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University
of Chester for the degree of Doctor of Professional Studies in Practical
Theology.

by

Helen Jane Warnock

March 2020

The material being presented for examination is my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or another HEI except in minor particulars which are explicitly noted in the body of the thesis. Where research pertaining to the thesis was undertaken collaboratively, the nature and extent of my individual contribution has been made explicit.

Acknowledgements

I am hugely grateful for the support of so many who have assisted me in my doctoral journey:

The Bible Society who have contributed funding towards my research.

My friends and family who have encouraged and supported me throughout.

My supervisor, Professor Wayne Morris; thank you for slowing me down and helping me 'see the wood for the trees'.

My DProf. cohort, who have spurred me on throughout this process; thank you for your friendship, alongside the entire learning community of the DProf. programme, an inspiring staff team and students whose comments, feedback and discussions have significantly added to my learning.

Finally, the participants and the youth ministry practitioners across Northern Ireland that they represent, an inspiring group of professionals deeply impacting the lives of young people.

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The nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland through the eyes of local practitioners

Helen Warnock

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to uncover the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. This inquiry was prompted by noting the confusion that exists with regard to the expressed frameworks and priorities of youth ministry across the academy and practice, alongside the lack of research into youth ministry within the Northern Irish context. These factors created the need to take time to excavate youth ministry practice in Northern Ireland through the perspective of the practitioner. Thus, this thesis aims to clarify what youth ministry is and how it is understood and expressed in the Northern Irish context today.

Guided by the motifs of uncovering and honouring, I engaged in a qualitative research process of semi-structured interviewing and an iterative process of data analysis using a hermeneutical phenomenology approach. Twelve youth ministry professionals from across the evangelical Protestant sector created the backbone of this research.

Findings revealed the significant influence of the practitioners themselves, alongside the distinctive nature of the Northern Irish context. First, I uncovered two dominant values held by practitioners: a personal and deeply held sense of vocation and a high regard for the Bible. Second, I discovered two significant markers with regard to context: church culture as a significantly embedded social institution in Northern Ireland and emerging social identities, as influenced by the backdrop of recent civil conflict.

However, it is the interplay of values, context and ministry that further displays the cohesive nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. The values operate as core motivating characteristics, creating a paradigm for practice committed to young people. This subsequently reveals a redemptive quality reflected not just in a ministry message but also through a ministry way, seen in the dynamic nature of youth ministry practitioners as agents of change.

Chapter One: Introduction

“[Y]ou can read loads of great books but they all always stop short because you go well that's America or that's England or that's . . . if only there was solid stuff in our context” (Mark).¹

I embarked on this doctoral process, as a researching practitioner, with the hope to establish future priorities for youth ministry in Northern Ireland. However, subsequently, three factors have shaped this research inquiry toward a different aim: literature regarding youth ministry, current practice, and the Northern Irish context. As I engaged with the related literature and further reflected on current practice within the Northern Irish context, it became apparent that it was necessary first to understand what matters to this ministry and then to explore what underpins its activity. Thus, the aim of this research project evolved into the commitment to understand the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland, exploring the purpose of youth ministry, its functions, remit and how it is understood on the ground.

Factors shaping the need for this research inquiry

Literature

There is a rich backdrop to contemporary youth ministry, spanning over two hundred years of age-related engagement across the United Kingdom (Smith & Jeffs, 2010; Ward, 2013). However, within the related literature I found an

¹ Mark is a youth ministry practitioner in Northern Ireland and one of the participants in this research. This quote is taken from the research interview with Mark. Throughout this thesis, comments from the participants are included at the start of each chapter to signpost core themes.

interweaving of functions, priorities and cultures as youth ministry has evolved in the United Kingdom and particularly in Northern Ireland. For example, there has been a movement from a child-focused to an extended adolescence remit (Root, 2006; Smith, 2013b), from an educational to a missional task (Sudworth, Cray, & Russell, 2007; Thompson, 2012), and from the provision through volunteers to professional employed resourcing (Clayton & Stanton, 2008; Rock, 2008; Sudworth et al., 2007). Alongside these shifts, I have noted changes across church and parachurch leadership (Garland & Fortosis, 1991; Minion, 2009; Thompson, 2012; Ward, 2013) and also government funding and involvement (Hammond, 2007; Harland & Morgan, 2006; Morgan, 2009), combined with the influence of American youth ministry activities and values (Ward, 2013). This has led to the discovery of a mix of operational frameworks, at times, conflicting statements of intent and thus a growing confusion regarding the nature of youth ministry today.

Current practice

Alongside the literature, questions have also arisen from my own practice. I have spent over twenty years working within the youth ministry sector in Northern Ireland; consequently, questions of purpose and praxis also connect with my own reflections from within this field.

In 2006, the faith-based interest group of Youthnet (a voluntary network of youth organisations operating in Northern Ireland) commissioned research to reveal the reach of faith-based youth work across the Youthnet membership. The research (Macaulay & Youthnet, 2006; Youthnet, 2013) revealed the significant dominance of faith-based provision in work with young people in Northern Ireland, as well as beginning to provoke a conversation as to the nature of faith-based youth work (Morgan, 2007; Youthnet, 2013, p. 2). The research findings showed that

- 68% of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were faith/church-based in 2005
- 57.8% of all members of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were

participants in faith/church-based youth groups in 2005

- 74.4% of all volunteer leaders in registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were volunteering in faith/church-based groups in 2005 (Macaulay & Youthnet, 2006; Youthnet, 2013).

As the statistics show, there was a high proportion of engagement with young people from agencies and organisations connected to both Protestant and Catholic expressions of faith. However, the scope of this research was limited and the findings are now somewhat dated. The research succeeded in raising the profile of faith-based provision but, sadly, the conversation it hoped to generate around the nature of this work did not materialise. Furthermore, as I reflect on my own practice, I am aware of work similar to that which I would have been engaged in, is represented in the figures above, yet I would not have called it faith-based youth work but rather youth ministry. This raises questions regarding the language used to represent practice and highlights the need for clarity regarding terminology and a further explanation of the nuances of different approaches in our engagement with young people. Also, if faith is significantly connected to our work with young people across Northern Ireland, the need to better understand what this engagement looks like is paramount; again, this underlines the need for this research project.

Context

This brings me to the third factor influencing this research inquiry, that of context – and specifically the Northern Irish context. Over the last twenty years, as a youth ministry practitioner, I have witnessed the Northern Irish context producing some rich but under-researched youth ministry practice. Therefore, an inquiry into the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland provides a new context within which to explore youth ministry today, offering a fresh perspective on youth ministry to both practitioners and the academy. There is no denying the significance of the civil conflict on the evolution of youth work and youth ministry in Northern Ireland (Gallagher, 2005; Hammond, 2007; Walsh & Harland, 2019). However, this project

seeks to identify other influential factors that contribute to the understanding of youth ministry in Northern Ireland.

It is the study of literature and reflection on my own practice, combined with an appreciation of the influence of the Northern Irish context, that underline the need to appreciate and investigate what youth ministry is and how youth ministry is expressed and understood in the Northern Irish context today. As Malan Nel states, “why we do what we do, is as important (if not more) as how we do it” (2019). Accordingly, this research project seeks to explore the purpose and functions of youth ministry in Northern Ireland, as well as drawing light on how it is understood. I hope this will lead to clarity with regards to the current expression of youth ministry in Northern Ireland and contribute to wider discussions as to the purpose of youth ministry.

Therefore, through this chapter I will expand on how literature, practice, and context have helped shape the direction of this research project and why I think understanding the nature of youth ministry is important for the Northern Ireland context. First, I will recognise the rich historical backdrop of youth ministry practice, articulating the historical evolution and significant themes in youth ministry development and show how they can result in mixed statements as to the nature of youth ministry today. Second, I will focus on the missing voice of youth ministry in research, as evident in the scholarship regarding the Northern Ireland context. Third, I will articulate the role of theology in youth ministry, in particular youth ministry’s growing association with practical theology, which is pertinent in the exploration of ministry. I will then make some concluding remarks on the focus of my research.

The evolution of youth ministry in Northern Ireland

While work with young people has been in existence for the last two hundred years, youth ministry as a practice is a relatively recent innovation. Only in the last fifty

years has youth ministry emerged as its own practice.² As Black further argues, “[c]ompared to the longer track record of Christian education, practical ministry, and traditional theological domains, youth ministry is the young upstart in the world of ministerial studies” (Black, 2009, p. 137).

While Black suggests this about ministerial studies, Brierley says youth ministry is a subsection of youth work: “[i]f youth work is the broad discipline involving informal educators engaged with young people, then youth ministry is a ‘specialism’ within it” (Brierley, 2003, p. 10). In fact, “what we now call youth ministry was known as youth work for many years” (Nel, 2005, p. 9). This is especially notable as the church in the United Kingdom had strong roots and engagement with terminology around youth work, as echoed in the work of Batsleer and Davies (2010); Green (2008) and Roebben (2012). Thus, historically and culturally these terms (youth work and youth ministry) have been used interchangeably and as I will outline in my synopsis of the historical evolution of youth ministry, there has been an interplay of these labels, reflective of this overlapping history and usage.

However, as Clyne states,

defining Christian work with young people is a complex issue due to the varieties of titles, names and descriptions used . . . However . . . there is sufficient evidence within the current literature to suggest a distinction between youth ministry and youth work within the Christian discourse (Clyne, 2015, p. 35).

Moreover this distinction seems more prevalent in Northern Ireland, as during the last twenty years in Northern Ireland there has been a shift regarding the language used to describe the youth-focused activities across church and parachurch settings.

² I recognise there is no definitive start date for youth ministry, as it has emerged over time; however, linking the writing of Neufeld (2002) suggesting the 1970s as the emergence of this specialism, with the data from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland regarding the first employed church youth worker in 1969 (Thompson, 2012, p. 40) would correlate with this approximate time frame.

This has resulted in the terminology and language of youth ministry becoming more commonplace, highlighting a potential difference for youth ministry in the Northern Ireland context that this project can explore. Already it seems an accent is forming across youth ministry in Northern Ireland, an idea that is explored through this thesis, as this research focuses on the youth ministry expression of church and parachurch agencies within this setting.

As I practitioner and researcher, I find Brierley's comment, noted earlier, that describes youth ministry as a specialism within youth work to be insightful, as an overlap regarding practice is indeed evident across Northern Ireland. Practice and language are not mutually exclusive (Green, 2008; Pimlott & Pimlott, 2008; Smith, Stanton, & Wylie, 2015; Stanton, 2012). However, in following and uncovering the Northern Ireland accent in youth ministry, this exposes the core focus of faith, that is not the priority of youth work. This can be seen in the local report from the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, outlining priorities for youth work (2013), alongside the wider United Kingdom research of Clayton and Stanton, as they share how at times Christian youth work is sidelined as objective and inferior (2008, p. 114). This focus on faith, both in terms of belief and lived practices, is significant for youth ministry. Moreover, my research reveals that practice does indeed carry a significant ministry emphasis, as I will show in chapter three, and a ministry way as I outline in chapter four, confirming an engagement with young people in Northern Ireland that centres on the ministry aspect of their practice. Throughout this introduction I will map out three stages in the evolution of youth ministry, and then allow my research to describe the fourth stage, contemporary youth ministry in Northern Ireland and in particular demonstrate the distinctive redemptive nature of youth ministry practice in Northern Ireland today.

However, first I will outline the historical evolution of youth ministry and highlight some of the significant emerging themes alongside noting shifts of emphasis. These changes have been influenced by ministries from America such as Christian Endeavour and the American Jesus Movement, as well as the emphasis in the United States on language of youth ministry rather than youth work. Changes have

also happened in response to national and local government intervention across the United Kingdom and the professionalisation of youth work and youth ministry as they address social issues and faith formation: altogether illustrating an evolving framework, remit and associated priorities for work with young people. Throughout this account, I will note the particular expressions that work with young people has taken in Northern Ireland, recognising that it has followed many of the similar patterns emerging across the United Kingdom and America.

Stage one: Foundations - mid 1800s to 1930s

Youth work was birthed from a mix of social need and religious benefit (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; Green, 2008). The work began with an initial focus on education, complemented with a growing understanding regarding the nature of adolescence and concentrating attention on young people as separate from adults. This work with young people in Northern Ireland and throughout the United Kingdom spans over two hundred years, and as such local youth ministry connects with the shifting landscapes and emphasis in praxis over this time (Borgman & Cook, 1998; Dean, 2000, 2010b; McCready & Loudon, 2015; Pimlott & Pimlott, 2008; Rock, 2008; Roebben, 2012; Senter, 2001; Smith, 2013b; Sudworth et al., 2007; Thompson, 2012; Ward, 2013).

Two seminal agencies, the Sunday School movement in the United Kingdom and Christian Endeavour in America, paved the way for and have deeply impacted youth ministry today (Smith, 2013b; Strommen, Jones, & Rahn, 2001; Sudworth et al., 2007). The global impact of both of these agencies are illustrative of the symbiotic relationship particularly between the United Kingdom and the United States in the development of work and ministry with young people over the last two hundred years. This is due to the strong church ties and evangelical connections between the United Kingdom and the United States (Bebbington, 2005; Noll, 2004b), alongside increased globalisation and the move to extended adolescence (Root, 2006, 2008; White, 2007, 2008b).

However, as I consider the interweaving of these two regions and the resulting impact on youth ministry in Northern Ireland, it is important to acknowledge the initial differences with regard to approach. In the United Kingdom, youth engagement involved social and educational goals (subsequently including state involvement) alongside faith formation, whereas in the United States, youth engagement was more focused on a faith formation route. I will illustrate this throughout this section. I propose that, with these mixed British and American roots, it is not surprising to see why youth ministry has a complex web of frameworks and a potentially confusing remit in Northern Ireland, as the influences and practices from two different originating models and contexts have combined through the decades.

The Sunday Schools, started in the late eighteenth century and pioneered by individuals such as Robert Raikes and Hannah More (Smith, 2013b; Sudworth et al., 2007), set a pattern in the United Kingdom for a separate gathering in which children could receive religious instruction. Subsequently, this model was echoed across Ireland and quickly the Sunday School movement was established across Northern Ireland:

The existence of a keen group of benefactors and the desire for education by ordinary Presbyterians meant that the number of Sunday Schools soon increased dramatically in Ulster from 256 in 1816 to 2,010 in 1841, almost two-thirds of the total number in the whole of Ireland (Holmes, 2006, p. 271).

This strong focus on education, with the establishment of a separate engagement with children and young people, gave birth to new ways to reach young people such as the YMCA and the Boys' Brigade (Ward, 2013) and the beginning of specific age-related activities. The first Boys' Brigade company was established in Belfast in 1888

(Thompson, 2012, p. 32) and the Girls' Brigade in Dublin in 1893 (GBNI, 2019).³ As McCready and Loudon note, these pioneering individuals across Northern Ireland

were driven by a sense of religious, moral and social duty with a compassion for the welfare of those young people . . . [T]here was a strong evangelical emphasis . . . [and] the leadership that emerged in those days was that of individuals with drive and vision and determination to do something on a voluntary basis (McCready & Loudon, 2015, pp. 5 -25).

As Smith correctly notes, “[a] further, important factor in the emergence of youth work was that people began to talk about youth . . . As public interest in ‘youth’ developed by the 1890s psychologists such as G. Stanley Hall began to build theories of ‘adolescence’” (2013b).⁴ Stimulated by the work of Hall, churches began to recognise their obligation to young people and so ventured into youth work (Rock, 2008).

At a similar time in the United States, the influence of foundational thinkers such as Cuyler, Bushnell and Clark came to the fore during the mid to late 1800s. Cuyler emphasised prayer, spirituality, vitality and organisational structure. Bushnell's thinking focused on the nurturing process, best modelled in Christian families and Clark expanded on Bushnell's idea of Christian nurture within the home, proposing the faith community as a nurturing context (Senter, 2010; Senter, 2004). Then as Clark's organisation, Christian Endeavour, came to England, it moved the “emphasis of work among young people away from ‘telling’ to ‘discovering, training and sharing’” (Ward, 2013, p. 27). Coupled with the formative influence of the temperance movement on the Christian Endeavour, this opened the evangelical

³ From the late 1880s to early 1920s many organisations that began in England subsequently established themselves in Northern Ireland such as the YMCA, Girls Friendly Society, Church Lads' Brigade, The Scouts Association and Girl Guides (McCready & Loudon, 2015).

⁴ “Before this, young people were thought to be adults when they were able to do a man's or woman's work. Historians, social theorists, and even some psychologists have argued that adolescence was the result of our cultural transitions as we moved into a modernised and globalised world. Adolescence, they assert, is the construction of cultural change more than strict biological or psychological realities” (Root, 2006, p. 270).

culture to public entertainment and the acceptance that entertainment and learning Christian ideas were compatible (Senter, 2007). The first Christian Endeavour was established in Belfast in 1889 (Newsletter, 2016, March 9) and by 1896 there were over a hundred Christian Endeavour societies in Ireland (Thompson, 2012, p. 32).

The late 1880s and 1890s also saw growth in work specifically with young women and the middle and upper classes across the United Kingdom. This is seen in the work of Emily Pethick who later was involved in the suffragette movement (Smith, 2013b) and the work of Children's Special Service Mission or 'CSSM' (later to be called Scripture Union), Crusaders (and Varsity) and Public School Camps (Ward, 2013). All three of these organisations focused on Bible teaching and equipping leaders and the significance of temporary communities such as camps, missions and house parties became part and parcel of the mode of operation across youth ministry (Thompson, 2012; Ward, 2013).

Scripture Union was among the first organisation to start work in Northern Ireland and Ireland, beginning with a mission at the seaside resort of Portrush in 1893 (SUNI, 2012); the growth of camps, missions and house parties continued to grow after World War One. During this time Crusaders (now called Urban Saints) began groups in Belfast and Londonderry and a camp in Castlerock (Urban Saints, 2014); and the first Christian Union was founded in Trinity College Dublin in 1919 and then at Queen's University Belfast in 1921 (CUI, 2019).

It is pertinent at this stage to highlight the political backdrop to life in Northern Ireland:

After the 1920 Act, six counties of Ireland became Northern Ireland, with its own parliament within the UK, and these same two communities were bound in perpetual tension, where each maintained different cultures and aspirations.

Young people in the new Northern Ireland state, controlled by a perpetual Unionist government, tended to go to different churches (Protestant and Catholic), which were the social hubs of their respective communities, be educated in separate schools, play different sports, and did not encounter each other until later in life, if at all (McCready & Loudon, 2015, pp. 4-5).

Division across the Protestant and Catholic faith and subsequently the associated communities, was prominent in Northern Ireland. This was not typical of the rest of the United Kingdom and underlines the significance of the political context in shaping the nature and activities of work with young people. I will address the impact of the conflict and associated divisions later in this chapter and as this thesis will show, the ripple effects continue today.

Stage two: Shifting priorities - post World War Two

After World War Two, mainland United Kingdom saw the beginning of state involvement in youth work due to the increase in post-war youth crime. The Albemarle Report in 1960 led to youth work being seen as a form of education in its own right, resulting in an increase in the provision for young people in youth clubs and also the professionalisation of youth work (McCready & Loudon, 2015; Smith & Doyle, 2002; Sudworth et al., 2007, p. 4). This created a formal and informal merging of youth work, youth ministry, Church and state and a mix of terminology and philosophies. Again, it is notable that the education priority remained strong in the United Kingdom, however, in Northern Ireland the impact of the Albemarle report was different due to the growing civil unrest.

During this time, work with young people in Northern Ireland began to take its own pattern and did not simply follow the lead from England. This does not deny the interest of the Northern Ireland state in youth work but rather recognises the growth with regard to faith-related activities. Global Christian mission agencies established movements on the island, such as Youth for Christ (YFC) in 1947 (NICVA,

2016) and Child Evangelist Fellowship in 1950 (CEF Ireland, 2019). Alongside this, was the growth in uniformed organisations; in 1940, the Girls' Brigade was introduced into Northern Ireland (GBNI, 2019) and in 1958, the first Northern Ireland Every Boy's Rally was started, with Every Girl's Rally beginning the following year (Rallies NI, 2019).

The success of the parachurch agencies produced competition between church and parachurch youth organisations, yet also acted as a catalyst for the church toward greater organisation and better quality youth ministries (Garland & Fortosis, 1991).⁵ Thus, this rise in parachurch agencies also marked a rise of mainline church engagement with young people across Northern Ireland. In 1945, the first Presbyterian Youth Committee was formed (Thompson, 2012, p. 12). The following year the Youth Department of the Methodist Church in Ireland opened (McCready & Loudon, 2015, p. v) and formally organised youth work within the Roman Catholic denomination began with the founding of the Down and Connor Youth Council in 1945 (McCready & Loudon, 2015, p. 63).

As both Thompson (2012) and Ward (2013) note, particularly in the Protestant expressions of the Christian faith, Sunday Schools remained the strategic focus, accompanied by the growth of youth fellowship, youth club and Bible class, as the three main emerging models of youth ministry. Alongside this was the growing influence of American evangelical values on youth ministry across Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. American youth ministry in the 1950s was characterised by elements of peer culture, "the fellowship groups, parachurch clubs, summer camps, mass rallies and teen programs . . . promised moral fortitude and a measure of protection from the demands of adulthood" (Dean, 2000, p. 524). This resonated with the concerns across the church regarding the lives of this younger generation. The commonly agreed objective of youth ministry was to help create the "church for tomorrow" (Dean, 2000, p. 524); a notable shift in articulation from education or

⁵ Parachurch is a shorthand umbrella term, used to refer to agencies, charities and movements that work alongside the church, complementing the aims of the Christian church but with separate and autonomous governance and employment structure. In the main, parachurch agencies tend to offer a specialism to the church, for example, youth or children's expertise.

faith formation to church creation. In the United States, youth ministry was forging a subculture among the evangelical wing of church society and its influence was spilling out across Northern Ireland. As Rock reflects “Northern Ireland’s very rigid evangelical tradition” (2008, p. 66) welcomed these evangelical expressions and at times compounded the subcultures and divisions.

The models of youth fellowship and youth club remained strong for the next fifty years, as the youth fellowship sought to engage with those young people within the church and youth club engage with those young people outside. For the most part, churches in Northern Ireland wanted to concentrate on Sunday School for younger children and youth fellowships for older teenagers (McCready & Loudon, 2015, p. 127). Youth fellowships were seen as ‘the main forum for learning, exchange of ideas and debate of Christian principles, implications, events and structures’ (Presbyterian Church in Ireland, 1973, p. 204).

The effect of this was slowly to polarize the traditions of youthwork within evangelicalism. While those reaching out on frontiers continued to give themselves in ministry tough places, often seeing little reward, those working in churches, many of which were located in the suburbs, regarded the youth fellowship as the only viable method of youth work (Ward, 2013, p. 72).

This work did give rise to an increased engagement in theology, opening up thinking around a theology of mission and a contextual theology, as well as frontier theology and a theology of presence (Ward, 2013, p. 76). However, as these new initiatives required a theological framework or a re-assessing of theological underpinnings, the traditional routes of faith development suffered. Consequently, I suggest the models of youth fellowship and youth club continued, without the theological scrutiny that could have re-envisioned and recreated these models for a more effective contemporary impact. The new thinking provoked by urban mission was beginning to create a vacuum in which strong theological thought wasn’t being given to the foundations of youth ministry and the spiritual development of young people.

Stage three: Emergence of youth ministry - 1970s to the present

From the late 1960s, work with young people moved from the volunteering role and remit of church members to those specifically employed to serve in churches and work with agencies. The Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) created its first Youth Secretary in 1966 and, in 1969, the first youth workers were reported in congregations (Thompson, 2012). By 1971, the Church of Ireland had set up their own Youth Department (McCready & Loudon, 2015, p. 128). As we move into the 1970s, McCready and Loudon recognised that

unlike in the 1950s, young people could no longer be assumed to be connected to the Church whilst being involved in the range of youth facilities they offered e.g. uniformed groups, youth fellowships, coffee bars and youth clubs. In a way there is an indication here of changing priorities in relation to PCI and youth work (2015, pp. 96-97).

Subsequently, the 1970s witnessed a shift toward a mission focus and the rise of youth club and coffee-bar situations, complemented the youth fellowship gatherings (Thompson, 2012, p. 34). This was followed in the 1980s by a rise in national young gatherings. PCI began its own denominational youth gathering, Youthreach in 1981. YFC's Mannafest started in 1987; this event ran for over fifteen years and attracted over a thousand young people each month from all across the country. The Church of Ireland also began a summer festival called Summer Madness in 1987, which is still running today. These events delivered a mix of evangelism and discipleship, engaging young people both inside and outside of church. They emerged as individuals and denominations,

saw a great spiritual need in the young people . . . A need for something new and fresh in the way of worship, teaching and the arts. A new way to encourage young people in their Christian faith and help them grow in it (Summer Madness, 2019).

Alongside these national events, a subsequent focus on service emerged, with a rise in year-long intern programmes and summer mission opportunities. SU and Crusaders paved the way for these models of ministry and now the programmes had been somewhat re-invented, there were many options for young Christians to serve. For example, the Methodist Church in Ireland launched its year-long team, Team on Mission in 1989 (Rock, 2008) and YFC launched its mission programme, Summerserve, in 1989 and an internship programme, Y-one in 1992 (Storrer, 1997, pp. 16-17). After the millennium, there was a rise in evangelistic drop-in centres, a reworking of the coffee bars model for non-church young people and a further rise in summer mission teams, including overseas opportunities and intern programmes.

This period witnessed significant changes with the increased professionalism of youth work and youth ministry. Brierley (2003) highlighted that the Church of England employed more youth workers than the combined local authorities in England and Wales. During the 1980s and 1990s the gap between secular youth work (with a focus on the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work set by the government) and youth ministry (with a distinctly Christian focus on mission and discipleship) began to widen (Sudworth et al., 2007, p. 5). This distinction was also apparent in Northern Ireland. Historically, the mainline denominations had attracted 100% grants from the Education and Library Boards for full-time youth work posts (Thompson, 2012, p. 40) but as parachurches grew and new churches formed outside of the main denominations, the language of youth ministry strengthened along with the focus on mission and discipleship.

Youth ministry moved from single youth workers in individual churches to coordinated youth structures with mainline denominations working together to deliver training. As Rock noted in 2008, “[o]ver the past twenty years youth ministry in Ireland has changed dramatically from a situation of no paid staff, other than headquarter staff in the main denominations, to over 150 full-time youth workers” (2008, p. 62). This growth and innovation extended across parachurch initiatives with the emergence of new agencies like Exodus, a disciple-making youth ministry

in 1997 (Exodus, 2019) and in 1999, new evangelistic organisations started in Northern Ireland, such as Crown Jesus (Crown Jesus Ministries, 2019) and Young Life (Young Life International, 2019).

Work with young people was expanding.⁶ For example, in considering job titles circulating in Northern Ireland, I have noticed that there is a variety of different approaches in working with young people: Youth Pastor, Director of Youth Ministry, Schools worker, Outreach worker, Support worker and Development worker. Clyne (2008) also recognised the plethora of titles emerging, noting twenty-eight different titles among 110 practitioners. Of course, in different contexts there will be the need for a variety of approaches and, at times, further specialisms. However, this diversity raises questions regarding the nature of youth ministry and if there is indeed any commonality of expression across youth ministry and, in particular, if youth ministry in Northern Ireland has a distinctive identity with a coherent purpose and function.

This shift of youth ministry to a missiological task was a significant (Sudworth et al., 2007, p. 8). Gray (2007) believes this was due to more young people being outside of church and ignorant of its beliefs than previously. In this post-Christendom culture, the biblical narrative is no longer the dominant story and where many Christians and churches are still operating from a Christendom mind-set, they are failing to recognise the challenges facing young people in connecting faith to the reality of their lives (Pimlott & Pimlott, 2008). As McQuillan argues “young people are sceptical of a religion that presents itself with old fashioned myths and metaphors” (2009, p. 83). Thus, within this landscape, the church is unsure of its place (Root, 2008; Sweet, 1990; White, 2007, 2008b), raising questions for youth ministry as how best to respond:

⁶ “It was not until 1990s that there began a series of additional appointments which indicated the priorities of the church. These included field officers for the Republic of Ireland, staff to oversee the work of the residential Centres and Year Teams and other central appointments: Youth Development Officer (1997), Children’s Development Officer (2005), and Young Adult’s Development Officer (2010), with also Training Officer and Director of Programmes” (Thompson, 2012, p. 37).

What is postmodernity's significance — is it a problem to be solved, a distortion to be resisted, a welcome source of methodological insight, or more cynically, simply the latest fashion? . . . For youth ministers, the temptation is great to focus on strategies and techniques, but if we fail to grasp the historic context of our ministry, we risk becoming complicit with cultural forces that subject youth to one distortion or another (White, 2007, pp. 7- 9).

In the 1990s some 500,000 children and young people left the church in the England, with the figures in 2005 revealing that half of churches have no 11-14 year olds attending and more than half have no 15-19 year olds (Clayton & Stanton, 2008). This drop in affiliation is echoed across Northern Ireland as between 1971 and 1991 the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church of Ireland and the Methodist Church of Ireland lost 135,581 members – slightly more than an eighth of their total membership (YFC, 2003). More recent figures echo this decline, with one in twenty young people belonging to the established church (Holden, 2018). Though as I show in chapter four, Northern Ireland has an unusually strong church culture that is still in operation, as the process of secularisation is slower than elsewhere in the United Kingdom (Doebler & Shuttleworth, 2018).

Initially, only secular organisations offered professionally recognised training until Oasis and The Centre of Youth Ministry (CYM) began to provide training and resources in Christian youth work and ministry (Sudworth et al., 2007, p. 5). CYM began in Ireland in 2008 providing degree and youth work qualifications, working as part of Youthlink seeking to provide professional training and OCN qualifications.⁷ This move to professionalism was not entirely problem-free. Across the United Kingdom, there was an undermining of the confidence of volunteers, alongside a shift to rely on the professional, and controversy arose around the conversion of

⁷ “Youthlink . . . as an interchurch youth agency is committed to, the development, empowerment and wellbeing of young people. From the outset it has been about good youth work practice and policy. It has also been engaged in community and relationship building producing models of good practice and policy in community relations, peacebuilding and reconciliation” (Johnston, 2019).

young people that attracted accusations of indoctrination and spiritual abuse of vulnerable young people (Clayton & Stanton, 2008).

Recent years have seen the rise in Northern Ireland of further specialist services to young people with a Christian ethos. These include, for example Love for Life, The Big House and Teen Challenge, each helping young people as they face difficulties, with support through education, training and counselling services. This move to embrace social issues is also evident in the emergence of practical service opportunities for young people such as StreetReach which gives young people across Northern Ireland the opportunity to serve their local communities.⁸

Alongside this has been the rise across the United Kingdom of parachurch agencies, seeking to support churches, like the 24-7 Prayer movement and Alpha, both creating resources for young people and practitioners. This growth in services and resources has led to a wide network of agencies seeking to engage with young people in Northern Ireland. In 2012, a learning community of individuals working across youth ministry in Northern Ireland was established called Connect 2020. This network embraced connections across denominations, individual churches, parachurch agencies and support agencies. It has birthed collaborative projects such as training events and resources, alongside mutual learning and improvements in youth ministry practice. This network continues to operate today under the new name of Together.

Alongside the rise in agencies and activity, there is also a move toward an all-Ireland reach and remit for youth ministry. The main denominations have always worked across the island but in the last five years agencies such as Exodus and Crown Jesus Ministries, as well as new organisations like Christ in Youth, have begun work in the Republic of Ireland. Some of this move has been enabled by increased financial resources, such as the collaborative work of the funding group J33, as well as an

⁸ "StreetReach historically was the missional experience offered by Summer Madness and the Church Army in the summers of 2003 – 2007. It sent over 3000 young people out to work in communities in Belfast and partnered with over 30 churches and community organisations across greater Belfast. The long term aim was to inspire young people and churches to be active in their communities and with almost 20 similar local missions springing in up since StreetReach" (StreetReach, 2019).

awareness of the needs of young people, as evident in the recent research commissioned by Christ in Youth (Barna & Christ in Youth, 2017). However, the growth in activity across the parachurch agencies seems to be masking a decline in church youth engagement. I have noticed fewer jobs advertised and the recruitment of part-time roles rather than previously full-time roles. As such, this perceived trend does question the churches' vision of youth ministry, and indeed how the church sees the role and needs of young people today. I would hope the results of this research project might both encourage and provoke the church across Northern Ireland to have an increased value and understanding of youth ministry.

As Neufeld (2002) states, youth ministry is young. As a profession, it did not take off in United Kingdom until the 1970s and since then it has continued to develop. It has evolved from a standardised and unified approach in the 1980s, to one that has shifted dramatically over the turn of the new century: "Gone are the days of one-size-fits-all ministry . . . Youth ministry will never again have a common methodological approach as it did in the previous century" (Neufeld, 2002, p. 195). This is a reflection that is echoed in Stirling's comment that there is "no generic youth ministry within Northern Ireland "(2011, p. 63).

While Sudworth argues that youth ministry is now a "missiological task, rather than primarily as a pastoral or educational one"(Sudworth et al., 2007, p. 8), I would argue the mix of practices contradicts this and illustrates a lack of clarity regarding priorities. (This view is further echoed in the academic and practice-based writings of Arzola (2006); Borgman and Cook (1998); Clark and Powell (2009); De Vries (2003); Myers (1987); Neufeld (2002); Oestreicher (2008); Senter (2001); Smith (2007) regarding a variety of models, frameworks and foundations.) This has resulted in conflicting propositions as to the purpose of youth ministry today, and the subsequent mix of operant frameworks that I believe create confusion as to the nature of youth ministry.

Youth ministry has suffered from one distortion to another due to this buffering

from internal (shifting priorities) and external forces (social and governmental priorities). The need to respond to the demands of the church and the needs of society has created the emergence of this specialty but I would argue a specialty without a robust framework. As the role of young people has become more valued, the demand for dedicated provision has increased, but the purpose of youth ministry is unclear or at least confusing. Clarity regarding the purpose of youth ministry is required and an understanding that deeply appreciates context, recognising its influence and impact on young people and therefore on youth ministry. Again, this raises the importance of the inquiry into what youth ministry is today.

As youth ministry has grown in confidence, this has created space to explore new and fresh areas as well as re-engage with foundational aspects of working with young people. This has seen the formation of the American-based Association of Youth Ministry Educators (AYME) and the European-based academic association (IASYM), adding to scholarly discussion and publications.⁹ Practice and academic input in the last twenty years have seen an increase in areas explored and areas researched. The dominant themes include all-age engagement and the exploration of family-based ministry, (Baker, 2008; Clark, 2016; Cloete, 2016; Crispin, 2017; Kauffman, Dean, Nishioka, & Parker, 2003; Yaconelli, 1999), a focus on spiritual formation (Fortosis, 2001; Foster, 2009; May, Stemp, & Burns, 2011; Root, 2017, 2018; Ross, 2005), an appreciation of extended adolescence (Dean, 2004; Oestreicher, 2008), the need for inclusion in youth ministry (Aziz, 2017; Jacober, 2010) and the need for long-term success (Morgan, 2007; Webber, Singleton, Joyce, & Dorissa, 2010; White, 2007).

However, the Northern Irish voice in youth ministry research is quiet and, as I will outline in the next section, civil conflict and youth work have dominated. The rich practice of youth ministry has remained under-researched and consequently, its voice and learning are missing from the academy.

⁹ IASYM stands for the International Association for the Study of Youth Ministry.

The Northern Ireland context and the missing voice of Northern Ireland's youth ministry from scholarship

Context and research

Northern Ireland has featured much in the media, during the civil conflict and post-conflict period of the Troubles over the last fifty years. Understandably, these difficult times have been the lead story both in government and academic interventions and subsequently significant emphasis has been placed in research and critical engagement at this time. The result is that much writing from within the academy has focused on the impact of the Troubles and the subsequent engagement with young people and connected evolution of youth work. This has led to an ignorance with regard to the growing area of engagement that is youth ministry and little research arising from the youth ministry sector in the Northern Ireland context. Yet as the previous section shows, practice is abundant with employment and voluntary opportunities across church and parachurch agencies (Youthnet, 2013).

Over the last twenty years, the main bodies of academic work with regard to young people in Northern Ireland fall under three main headings – conflict, segregation, community relations – and of course the natural connections across all three (Bell, 1987; Harland, 2009; Hayes & McAllister, 2009; Niens & Cairns, 2005; Veeran & Morgan, 2009; Walsh & Harland, 2019).¹⁰ As Bell comments, there is a “tendency to pathologize youth in N.I. . . . making N.I. a laboratory for the study of adolescent pathology” (1987, p. 161), further sensationalising the issue or as Gordon showcases in her work regarding how young people are represented in the press media in Northern Ireland, “children and young people are convenient scapegoats”

¹⁰ In the last couple of years, there has been a rise in new areas of academic intervention with regards to young people in Northern Ireland especially around gender and mental health, for example, Fargas-Malet and McSherry (2018); McBride and Schubotz (2017).

(2018, p. 213). Unfortunately, the number of research articles alone would support this, resulting in an inevitable stereotyping of the life of a young person in Northern Ireland. Thus, it is important that this research does not make assumptions but seeks to uncover what is important to youth ministry, through effective listening, reflexivity and a robust research process. Moreover, in resisting stereotyping life in Northern Ireland, as Mitchell and Ganiel recognise, it is important to broaden “the debate about religion beyond the parameters of a predominately Troubles-focused literature” (Mitchell & Ganiel, 2011, p. 188):

Undoubtedly, experiences of the Troubles are important to many peoples’ religious journeys. But people spend just as much time talking about the more mundane, everyday aspects of their lives, marriages and families, friends and colleagues, health and illness, books and music . . . everyday life (Mitchell & Ganiel, 2011, p. 188).

The candour of this reflection resonates with my own perspective of life in Northern Ireland. Therefore through this research, I will investigate life beyond the Troubles, recognising that it is not the only lens through which young people of Northern Ireland or youth ministry can be seen. However, as I will show in chapter four, the ripple effects of the civil conflict and division continue today and sadly are significantly affecting youth people and therefore youth ministry practice.

Youth provision and research

Before the Troubles, youth provision in Northern Ireland mirrored what was happening across the United Kingdom. Afterwards, the need to tackle the very real sectarianism was realised as cross-community projects, strategic partnerships came to the fore and initiatives that had a religious dimension accessed government funding. Northern Ireland was the first place in the United Kingdom with statutory youth provision in 1973 (Hammond, 2007) following a year of the highest death toll due to conflict: “over 35 years youth workers in Northern Ireland have been at the

coal face of responding to the needs of young people in a deeply divided and contested society. This has included addressing prejudice reduction and conflict transformation” (Harland, 2009, p. 9).

Youth work in Northern Ireland has historically been involved with both education and welfare provision, engaging with the manifest forms of poverty, violence, anti-social behaviour, hooliganism and paramilitary influence, that impact upon the lives and development of young people here. Crisis has been the catalyst to necessary intervention and the state has been a key provider and the chase for the elusive ‘peace money’ cannot be denied in its shaping of youth provision (Morgan, 2009). Too often practice has been shaped by funding requirements, policies for formal education, social exclusion measures and the persistence of sectarian social divisions, rather than focused on the importance of relationship-building and attending to process (Harland & Morgan, 2006): “[W]hile youth work has potential to engage and support young people, it is unrealistic to suggest that youth work can become a panacea for all that society perceives as ‘wrong with young people’” (Harland, Morgan, Muldoon, & Department of Education, 2005, p. 57).

Even now in post-conflict times the issues of deprivation are very real (Coryton, Grimmett, Hargreaves, Marshall, & Waterman, 2007). There are “shaming levels of child and family poverty” (Coryton et al., 2007; Pinkerton, 2003, p. 264). For example “25% of children were in poverty in 2014/15, approximately 109,500 children, compared to 23% the previous year” (“The Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin 2014/15”, 2016). The ripple effects of the Troubles and our segregated society continue:

While the external perception of Northern Ireland is a society that has emerged successfully from three decades of war, the impact of the Conflict continues. The broadly proclaimed peace dividend was not evident in the views of children, young people, community members and workers who participated in the research (McAlister, Scraton, & Haydon, 2014, p. 308).

There are many voices suggesting important priorities for youth work (Bell, 1987; Cummings, Taylor, Merrilees, Goeke-Morey, & Shirlow, 2016; Drissel, 2007; Holland, Reynolds, & Weller, 2007; McArdle & Morgan, 2018; Niens & Cairns, 2005; Whyte, 1998; Wilson, 2015). Harland's research quotes several practitioners stating that "many young people aged twelve and under had little recollection of the Troubles" (Harland, 2009, p. 16), emphasising again the need for our past not to be the sole dictator of practice and priorities. This opens up an interesting line of inquiry in this research as to how youth ministry is responding to post-conflict needs. As Hammond concludes "Northern Ireland is a changing society" and though youth work needs to address the legacy of conflict, it also need to be open to addressing new issues that arise (Hammond, 2007, p. 54).

The unique context of Northern Ireland has meant much of the work with young people within the youth work sector and youth ministry sector has been divided or segregated, resulting in separate groups working with Catholic communities and with the Protestant communities.¹¹ This division did not just arise during the civil conflict emerging in the 1970s across Northern Ireland. As McCready and Loudon outline, the "political backdrop of the 19th century into the early 20th century in Ireland was one where Catholic and Protestant young people went to separate schools, played different sports and the governance of the country was contested" (2015, p. 24). These divisions are evident in the provision of youth engagement.

Gallagher (2005) helpfully outlines the development of youth ministry across the Catholic faith, evolving from sporadic gatherings in a few places to being developed across every diocese, illustrating the significance of faith connections for young people in Northern Ireland. "No other region of Ireland to date has co-ordinated ministry to young people on an ongoing basis like the dioceses in Northern Ireland" (Gallagher, 2005, p. 138). Though as the date of this publication suggests, even writing from a Catholic youth ministry perspective is limited.¹²

¹¹ This in no way ignores the significant engagement across the divides and the growing inclusive work across cultural identities, as outlined in the work of McKeown and Cairns (2012).

¹² More recent writing has focused on the church as whole, highlighting the uncertain future for the Catholic church, for example, Baker (2018) and Keane (2018).

However, as Gallagher notes,

[t]he faith of young people became important to them in a different way from their counterparts in other parts of Ireland. It was an identity and a reference point. The expression of faith in Northern Ireland at times is more traditional and conservative, probably due to the impact of political realities . . . [There] has been a noticeable decline in young people attending Mass and other events that have been organised . . . Unless serious efforts are made to guide young people through their search for a deeper faith, more young people will become distanced from the life of the Church (Gallagher, 2005, pp. 138-139).

This excerpt highlights the unique attitude of Northern Ireland young people to their faith, the more traditional conservative expression of this and the call to a deeper faith. This raises questions as to how the Troubles have shaped both the understanding of faith and expression of it, as well as how youth ministry might help young people deepen their faith.

In 1965, the Rev. Ray Davey, who was the Presbyterian Chaplain at Queen's University, purchased a residential centre in Ballycastle in 1965 and Corrymeela became a Christian community dedicated to peace and reconciliation. However, Dickson criticizes the church for their lack of prioritising reconciliation work (1998, p. 89) and it was not until 1991 that the four mainline churches in Northern Ireland (Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Methodist and Catholic) launched Youthlink, seeking to build cross-sectional partnerships and training programmes in youth work and community relations, peacebuilding and reconciliation (Youthlink, 2013). PCI also appointed a Reconciliation Officer in 1990, "to help resource the church's young people and leaders to address division and reconciliation in Ireland and in 1998 the Reconciliation Working Group established a strategic plan called 'Preparing Youth for Peace' which developed into a very significant programme of the same name, receiving funding from outside sources including the Peace Fund and enabling the appointment of a Programme Officer" (Thompson, 2012, pp. 41-

42). Though, as Dickson (1998) acknowledged, much of the reconciliation work was outside of the church and dependent on key individuals.

The role of religion in the conflict has always been a matter of some debate (Bruce, 1986; Greer, 1985, p. 275; Mitchell & Ganiel, 2011) and “the subtleties necessary to theological thought have not always been appreciated” (Dunlop, Clifford, & Elliott, 1982, p. 45). The Troubles, though, were not the sole factor in the sea change impacting the church across Northern Ireland. The religious fatigue and disillusionment were also fuelled in part by the revelations across church leadership, of sexual misconduct, child sex abuse, alongside growing sectarianism (Stirling, 2011). Alongside these issues “the chill wind of secularism was beginning to blow on this island” (Dunlop et al., 1982, p. 47) and the religious trends in Belfast echoed those in British, Irish and Western cities, with the Troubles only serving to accelerate the process (Minion, 2009). However, as McMaster states, “Faith cannot trundle along as if the years of violent, sectarian conflict and trauma never happened” (Youthnet, 2013, p. 4).

As the church engages with young people, it highlights the subsequent divisions regarding provision. Youth ministry is not necessarily limited to a Protestant expression, as the work of Gallagher (2005) illustrates, nor is it limited to a Protestant evangelical expression. However, in noting the absence of youth ministry from the academy, if there is little written about youth ministry, there is even less written and researched about youth ministry within the Protestant sector in Northern Ireland.

Protestant youth ministry

The Protestant church across Northern Ireland has been significantly shaped by the influence of evangelicalism:

Evangelicalism has its origins in the 18th century revival movements in English Anglicanism and continental pietism. It was an international phenomenon, spreading quickly to North America through the missionary efforts of itinerant preachers such as John Wesley and George Whitefield. Evangelical history in Ireland generally dates from 1747, when Wesley made his first visit to the Island. Evangelicalism then, as now, was a diverse movement, encompassing Christians in a variety of denominations (Ganiel, 2008, p. 3).

This can be seen to permeate through the Protestant church denominations in Northern Ireland, such as Presbyterian, Baptist, Elim, and some aspects of the Church of Ireland and Methodist, as well as in new expressions of church such as Vineyard and through parachurch agencies such as Scripture Union, Youth for Christ, Crown Jesus Ministries and Exodus. Furthermore, across each of these, rich youth ministry practice operates in Northern Ireland.

There has been much written on evangelicalism from key voices such as Bebbington and Noll among others (Bebbington, 2005; Bloesch, 2008; Goff & Steensland, 2013; Miller-McLemore & Wiley, 2012; Noll, 1993, 2004a, 2004b, 2007; Scalise, 2011).

The most widely accepted definition [of evangelicalism] proposed by D.W. Bebbington, identifies four marks . . . '*conversion*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible and . . . *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.' . . . [And regards itself as] a movement rather than an institutional church or a denominational tradition (Scalise, 2011, p. 578).

Noll argues evangelicalism is "an activist movement rather than a self-critical scholarly one" (Noll, 2004a; Scalise, 2011, p. 584) and as Bloesch notes carries an "irrepressible missionary impulse" (Bloesch, 2008, p. 16). These two characteristics can be found across youth ministry (Root, 2007a; White, 2018) which also open up pertinent questions as to the limitations or boundaries that these might create.

The specific backdrop to Protestant evangelicalism in Northern Ireland is complicated with little academic research and what does exist, as Ganiel notes, is limited to peace and reconciliation (Ganiel, 2006). Some recent local researchers such as Ganiel, Jordan and Mitchell are attempting to understand this area further. As Jordan highlights, Protestant evangelicals are “one of the least understood and least engaged sectors in Northern Ireland’s society” (Jordan, 2001, p. xi). Ganiel describes evangelicals as a group where the “term ‘fundamentalist’ has perpetuated misconceptions of the role of religion in politics” (Ganiel, 2006, p. 137). It is “not easy to pigeonhole Northern Irish Protestants into subcategories or types” (Mitchell & Ganiel, 2011, p. 24).¹³ As one of the participants in Jordan’s research stated, this is often a group caught “between two cultures” (Jordan, 2001, p. 106). The recognition of the loss of power and continued changes in balances of power have affected this group significantly both during and since the Troubles (Ganiel, 2006, 2008).

Consequently, through noting the significance of the evangelical movement on the Protestant churches across Northern Ireland and subsequently on youth ministry this signals toward an interesting avenue for research of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. My hope would be to allow my research to explore these aspects further and note the emphasis or expression of evangelicalism within youth ministry.

It is not possible to sidestep the significance of ministry that is contextualized. As Widstrom (2003) advocates for youth ministry to be successful it must be local. This connects with Pimlott’s and Pimlott’s (2008) comments commending every church group, community and team to consider their own situation, culture and needs. Widstorm’s work (2003) highlights the need for today’s youth ministers to not just adapt youth ministry models to their context but to reflect on the cultural idiosyncrasies of their group, which I propose further compounds the need for

¹³ Though both Ganiel (Ganiel, 2008) and Jordan (Jordan, 2001) have tried to help understand this group better through categorising.

youth ministry to tighten their relationship with practical theology so as to increase those needed skills for their context (Osmer, 2008). Interestingly this theme was picked up more recently by Weber advocating that “youth ministry models employed should consider the vision, mission and needs of the contexts in which they are to be used” (Weber, 2017). Weber’s comments underline the need to appreciate the nature of youth ministry but also to further appreciate the nature of youth ministry within its situated context, which introduces the next theme, youth ministry’s connection with theology.

The role of theology in youth ministry

Youth ministry’s engagement with theology is in a period of re-emphasis. “There has been much focus in recent years on the theological nature of youth ministry” (Aziz, Nel, & Davis, 2017). Youth ministry’s need for theological engagement has been well documented. Canales (2006); Clark (2008b); Dean (2013); Livermore (2002); Root (2007b, 2012) and Root and Dean (2011) are among the voices advocating for stronger theological engagement. Yet, as Clark (2008b) highlights, the skills aspect of youth ministry is over-valued and the theological discipline of youth ministry is often not recognised. Therefore, I am interested to see if there is indeed a solid theological and ministerial praxis and what theological and biblical foundations are evident from Northern Irish practitioners. I am not trying to look for pastoral strategies but rather the foundations from which models, strategies and practices might flow. My reasoning for this level of investigation returns to the very questions birthing this research, regarding if there a commonality across youth ministry and if youth ministry in Northern Ireland has a coherent purpose and framework.

As Zirschky passionately reminds us, the role of theology in youth ministry is not in addition but crucial to its nature:

[Y]outh ministers are not merely educators armed with religious content. Neither are they merely counsellors who help ferry Christian young people safely through the turbulent waters of adolescence; nor are youth ministers simply religious marketers, prophetic pitchmen, savvy businesswomen, or cruise ship recreation directors. While they may be called upon to function in some of these capacities along the way in youth ministry, we believe youth ministers are called to be precisely that: ministers. Ministry, if it is truly to be ministry, is grounded not in educational theory, but in theology. That means that youth ministry is a theological discipline, not a branch of psychology (Zirschky, 2012).

If youth ministry is indeed a specialism within youth work, then this aspect is worth pursuing further, as to what this ministry actually looks like and how it connects with a theological framework, in particular, youth ministry's connection with practical theology.

The last thirty years have seen the emergence of youth ministry into its own field of study (Root, 2009a, p. 55). There has been much debate about the proposition of youth ministry as operating within the discipline of practical theology, (Clark, 2008a, 2008b; de Kock & Hallesby Norheim, 2018; Dean, 2008, 2010b; Parrett, 2008; White, 2008a; White, 2018). This is illustrated as different voices call for different emphases, for example, Parrett's call to a "faithful catechetical vision" (Parrett, 2008, p. 65) or White, (2008a) advocating for a more intuitive-effective approach or Dean's perspective, (2008) recognising that youth ministry contributes as much to practical theology as it receives, as its practice enables young people to see where Christ is at work they too get involved.

Throughout this ongoing debate, Root's voice has been key. Root holds that "Youth ministry is a practical theological discipline that seeks to construct a theology of action/practice for younger generations of people" (2009a, p. 71). He pushes youth ministry in its engagement with practical theology keeping the fundamental task of youth ministry at its core, as it examines "how divine action connects to human

beings in the first third of the human life span” (Root, 2007a, p. 33). Furthermore, in recent years, Root and Dean’s influential work (2011) articulated a turn in youth ministry towards a greater theological engagement, as they expose an increased interest and practice among those involved in youth ministry to reflect theologically.

As I have outlined the history of youth ministry, the engagement of faith has been evidenced strongly, yet as Amy Jacober highlights, in her interview with Bradbury, “[t]here is a false belief that theology unnecessarily complicates ministry . . . Ministry too easily can become shaped by what works rather than what flows from a biblical or theological foundation” (Bradbury, 2011). We can see this is echoed in the work of Powell, King, and Clark (2005) as they examined the training needs of those involved in youth ministry. “Many surveyed commented that the demands of leading youth ministry programs often prevented practitioners from remaining cognizant of the theological framework that was the initial impetus for program development” (Powell et al., 2005, p. 91). It may also be seen in Hielema’s (2010) critique, that those in youth ministry have avoided theology and doctrine due to a misplaced value on unity.

Pearson and Gapes helpfully noted that “[o]ne reason for the relative lack of a theological basis of youth ministry has been the difficulty in transplanting theological concepts and constructs from the academic realm to youth ministry” (2002, p. 9). Accordingly this has created the possibility “for ministers to become so infatuated with a secular model of practice that they neglect their primary commitments and eventually find themselves divorced from them” (Lyll, 2001, p. 180). As Nel acknowledges “so many people working with adolescents do not have, by training or by passion, a growing capability or serious desire to understand the Bible and to discern theology” (2003, p. 21).

Nevertheless, it is the very engagement with practical theology that both strengthens confidence and practice (Clark, 2008b; Root, 2006). As Canales states, “[a] comprehensive youth ministry must be firmly rooted in solid theology and

ministerial praxis” (2006, p. 230). “[N]othing is more relevant to the ever-changing tides of youth ministry than a strong, theological framework. Sociological and psychological phenomena cannot be the foundation of youth ministry. God’s story must be the anchor” (Livermore, 2002, p. 97).

This raises the possibility that youth ministry has limited its work to keeping “young people ‘safe’ within their faith” (Ward, 1996, p. 16) and lost sight of the theological vision of this ministry. It is a theme that Ward picks up again sixteen years later when responding to Andrew Root’s thoughts on the theological turn in youth ministry. Ward spoke of the need in youth ministry to think more theologically and not limit theology to when in a church or youth group but work out ways of talking about God regardless of the place. In the absence of thinking theologically, we reach for other things we can learn from, resulting in a secularising tendency of practice (Ward, 2012). As Dean acknowledges, we have stopped talking theologically and lost the ability to believe theology can change things:

If we seek God's transformation for adolescents — and if we hope to convince them that Christianity is worth the trouble — the church must reclaim passion, and specifically God's passion in Jesus Christ, as fundamental to its identity. This will require a more self-conscious theological awareness in youth ministry than we currently possess. This is not to say that youth ministry . . . never needs car washes or lock-ins, only that these activities — like all church activities — are harnessed for a larger purpose: to enlist young people in the mission of God (Dean, 2004, p. 10).

These questions from Ward and Dean are worth giving attention to, as I consider the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland and explore if a theological framework is present and, if so, how it is expressed. Dean (2010b) recognises that though youth ministry has matured, it is still lacking a distinctive pedagogy and an absence of clearly articulated goals. There is a danger this lack of articulated goals could lead to what Severe calls “the Pac-man syndrome” (2006, p. 77) or Dekker,

the "fix-it" paradigm (2011, p. 84), when the need to do "something" has taken over. Or as Fiorenza states, "practice" has become the shibboleth" (1987, p. 113).

Black also acknowledges this struggle with theory and praxis alongside "the pressure to over-emphasize the practical" (2009, p. 139). Likewise Brain argues that maybe the "shackles of pragmatism" have gripped this profession, robbing it of developing a skilful praxis (2013, p. 6). This raises questions as to whether it is in the very nature of youth ministry to default to practice and if this is an overflow of the activist connection with evangelicalism.¹⁴ "As the movement from pragmatic to theoretical drives the field in the 21st century, developing a conceptual understanding regarding youth ministry practices becomes important for future effectiveness" (Linhart, 2003, p. 27) .

I highlight this debate to illustrate the tension running through youth ministry today and raise a question similar to Lyall's recovery of *Integrity for Pastoral Care* (2001) regarding the need to consider what integrity for youth ministry means. Through this research, I wish to explore what the theological nature of youth ministry looks like, testing if there is indeed a theological framework underpinning youth ministry and consider if this work is helping young people connect with God. Therefore, as this inquiry researches theology as lived practice, it will add to these ongoing conversations around theology and youth ministry and the understanding of the contemporary Northern Irish expression of youth ministry.

Indeed, as I will show in chapters three and four, youth ministry practice in Northern Ireland reveals a lived theology, rich in its foundations and its expression. I refute many of the criticisms facing youth ministry regarding a lack of theological engagement. This is not a practice that is void of theological engagement or suspicious of theology or incapable of working and reflecting theologically. In fact, as this research shows, the richness of this expressed theology uncovers an integrity

¹⁴ As cited earlier in the introduction, Noll describes evangelicalism as "an activist movement rather than a self-critical scholarly one" (Noll, 2004a; Scalise, 2011, p. 584).

as these practitioners' values, beliefs and practice work together, informing and creating the Northern Irish expression of youth ministry.

Concluding remarks

Throughout this chapter, I have outlined the shifts in the evolution of youth ministry, noting the changes in activities. These include, for example, the change from Sunday Schools to camps, from youth fellowship to evangelistic drop-in centres, and from single workers to coordinated management. During these changes in engagement, the prominence of youth ministry as a descriptor for Christian faith youth engagement in Northern Ireland has emerged, particularly evident with the rise in parachurch youth agencies. This focus on ministry is crucial, returning to the core question of this research project regarding the nature of engagement and seeking to reveal the characteristics of youth ministry in Northern Ireland, that Northern Irish accent of youth ministry. It is an inquiry not simply regarding activity but establishing the explicit and especial nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland.

As I have explained, there is lack of academic writing and research regarding youth ministry in the Northern Ireland context, particularly in the Protestant evangelical sector. Also, as my own practice has been within the Protestant evangelical sector, it makes sense for this to be the focus of my work. As McGrath argues, there is "the need for evangelicals to reassess their own history and traditions to see how from within these resources their might be the fuel for future developments" (as referenced in Ward, 1996, p. 16). Though more importantly, holding to the task of this research project, my hope is this intervention will uncover an accurate picture of the nature and function of youth ministry *in* Northern Ireland.

There are many avenues for exploring youth ministry, for example, through the eyes of young people themselves or their communities and I believe those could be

enlightening subsequent studies. However, to begin with I am interested to draw on the experience and beliefs of those working within youth ministry. I have witnessed wise and rich practice from practitioners across the country and as such I am keen to reveal what is happening, to inquire into what is beneath this practice. I want to listen to those who are operating within this field and notice how they talk about youth ministry and how they interpret what they are doing. I want to explore the “divine action” of youth ministry that Root describes (2007b, p. 33) or as Craig, one of the participants in this research, talks of youth ministry as “intentionally bring[ing] Christ into that world.” Thus, uncovering the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland through the perspective of the practitioners. I will outline more of the rationale and process behind this in my methodology chapter.

This leads to the final important thread throughout this research and that is the engagement with theology, in the process of research, in analysis and reflection of youth ministry and also to discover how theology is understood and expressed in contemporary youth ministry. The perceived lack of theological engagement within the development of youth ministry has been noted, alongside the rich ongoing debate regarding practice and theology. Therefore, the aim for this piece of research is to engage with the faith and active ministering nature of youth ministry and honestly wrestle with the integrity of function, thus investigating theology that is “enacted and embodied in Christian practice” (Graham, 2002, p. 3). If research into the nature of youth ministry is to adequately explore the practice of ministry, alongside the impact of evangelicalism and the mix of religion and conflict as they exist in the Northern Ireland context, the need for a theological investigation is vital. This theological thread will also be explored further in the next chapter.

In conclusion, I plan through this research to uncover the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. I will seek to reveal how Northern Irish practitioners understand youth ministry; consider their experience, what they value and see if there is clarity regarding the function and direction of youth ministry – if you like, uncovering the Northern Ireland accent in youth ministry. The course here is not to simply expose the wisdom of practice but to also investigate the significance of

place within ministry and potentially open a further conversation around the importance of engaging with context in ministry.

In chapter two I will outline the research method and the importance of holding to this theological intervention. Chapter three uncovers the underlining values held by the youth ministry practitioners, noting the presence and motivating nature of a personal and deeply held sense of vocation and a high regard for the Bible that create a paradigm for practice that is committed to young people. This subsequently reveals a redemptive quality, explored in chapter four. Altogether this establishes the characteristics of that Northern Ireland accent in youth ministry, deeply impacted by its context, carrying tones of faith and Scripture but particularly noticeable in its compassionate commitment to young people. This accent can be heard as they perform redemptive practices of transformation. It is evident in the embrace of the opportunities they have with young people, through their value of and actions towards relationship-building, in the space created for young people to wrestle with the questions and challenges of contemporary living, and in their ministry manner that is seeking the transforming liberation of young people and their communities.

Chapter Two: Methodology

“I would love to hear everyone’s else’s answers” (Mark).

Introducing the directional motifs of uncovering and honouring

The aim of this research is to identify how practitioners involved in youth ministry in a Northern Ireland context understand what it is they do. Consequently, any engagement in research within one’s own field of practice has the danger of compromise or of bias seeping in and so I established two motifs, namely, uncovering and honouring, to help direct my approach and engagement.¹⁵ By teaming these two together, I had robust twin tracks to direct my methodology and research process, which have proven invaluable.

This idea of uncovering or even excavation is not new to practical theology and the subsequent research process. Graham references Browning’s work “as a form of critical ‘excavation’ of the truth-claims enacted in the purposeful pastoral actions of the corporate faith-community” (2002, p. 112) and later in the same book uses the term to describe her own process. Though the uncovering I am engaging in is not in the same area as Graham’s, the desire to “render visible and vocal the dimensions of . . . lives made hidden and silent” (Graham, 2002, p. 174) remains crucial. It will reveal what practitioners thought about youth ministry and how this translated into their practice, through the careful revelation of layers, to expose a richer

¹⁵ Knott’s chapter explores the insider/outsider perspectives, highlighting the complexities of “subjectivity and objectivity, emic and etic perspectives” and the tension facing every researcher when studying religion (Hinnells, 2009, p. 271). Much has been written on the insider outsider perspectives and tensions (Arweck, Stringer, & Worship in Birmingham Project, 2002; Cameron & Duce, 2013) and on managing subjectivities (O’Leary, 2004) yet one of the original voices, Kenneth Pike, helpfully argues that the emic perspective “studying behaviour as from inside the system” (Pike, 1967, p. 37) helps us to understand not just the language used and the culture but also the individual themselves as it gives insights to values and viewpoints connecting strongly with the aims and outcomes of my research (Pike, 1967).

understanding of youth ministry. These layers were exposed by the interviews, the transcribing and also throughout the analysis, engaging in an excavation through the questions, responses, participants' self-understanding and reflection to reveal how the practitioner sees themselves and their practice. This is an uncovering, not just in function but also in process, engaging with a style of data collection that would allow for this and an analysis that would be cohesive with this direction. With this in mind, I sought out an approach that would allow for a high engagement with practitioners, facilitate the need to listen and engage with *their* words and ideas well and enable ongoing reflexivity. This is further complemented by a form of analysis that would delve into both what was being said and how, all working together to result in compelling conclusions.

This inductive research approach (Oliver, 2010, p. 38) connects with what Osmer has termed as 'the Descriptive - Empirical Task - Priestly Listening'. Through the uncovering or – as Osmer terms it – “formal attending”, one is facilitating a deeper “understanding of what is going on in particular episodes, situations and contexts and is a genuine expression of a spirituality of presence” (Osmer, 2008, p. 39); as well as “allowing interpretive guides to better understand the people who participate in this dialogue” (Osmer, 2008, p. 41). Uncovering or attending is not just a data-gathering exercise but “a spiritual orientation of attending to others in their particularity and otherness within the presence of God” (Osmer, 2008, pp. 33-34). As such, Osmer's approach creates a helpful directive for this research, as a theological intervention.

Alongside the uncovering, the motif of honouring was also fundamental – an honouring of participants' words and ideas. O'Leary uses the metaphor “change agent” to describe the type of researcher where there is “sensitivity to the words and actions of respondents” (2004, p. 92) but what I was pursuing was more than a surface sensitivity. If I wanted to bring clarity to my research question, I needed to dig in, to listen carefully to participants' words and meaning, to allow their thoughts to carry weight and keep in check my own bias or ideas. This would allow me to recognise my role as a fellow practitioner as an asset to this process, as I know the

language and associated meaning around youth ministry, as well as appreciating that this also carries its own subjectivity that cannot go unchecked. This need for reflexivity is not new to the research process.¹⁶ As Pattison concludes in his chapter on hidden beliefs,

instead of aspiring to become free of faith or beliefs, leaders might become more critically aware of their basic beliefs and assumptions. This awareness would allow them to engage in more careful assessment of the nature, content, effects and desirability of their beliefs . . . to possess their faith systems more dearly rather than be possessed by them (Pattison, 2007, p. 81).

Hence, this became my aim, to engage more carefully, identifying both the participants' faith systems as well as my own. As Root reflects, practical theology is, "a deeply reflective enterprise help[ing] me to honour the practical experiences that I and others had of divine action without disconnecting these experiences from thoughtful analysis" (Root, 2014b, p. 96). This underpinned the goal of exposing youth ministry in Northern Ireland to the academy and cemented that link with practice that is at the heart of the professional doctorate.

Equally this notion of honouring was personally very important. I knew even before gathering the data began, there would be a strong possibility I would know some of the participants because this was a field in which I had worked for twenty years; the youth ministry community in Northern Ireland is relatively small and close-knit and the need to honour peers' thoughts was professionally integral.¹⁷

¹⁶ Mason among others highlights reflexivity in the researchers process, "thinking critically about what you are doing and why, confronting and often challenging your own assumptions and recognizing the extent to which your thoughts, actions and decisions shape how you research and what you see" (Mason, 2002, p. 5).

¹⁷ The ethics concerning researching peers and professional colleagues was addressed in my research ethics proposal. As I outline in this methodology chapter, I have sought to combat any bias or power dynamic through the careful selection of the type of interviewing technique, the romantic concept of interviewing (Alvesson, 2003), "member checking" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 115), and the strong emphasis on reflexivity throughout the research process both from the practitioners and myself as a researcher.

As my methodological pathway evolved, I sought to uncover what these practitioners thought and knew, honour their contribution and allow all engagement or critique to be built on and boundaried by the motifs of uncovering and honouring. From these foundations, I constructed and evaluated my direction of travel.

Constructing the approach for this research project

As Osmer states,

Practical Theology . . . takes human experience very seriously . . . Attending to human experience in both reflective practice and scientific research is a distinctive orientation of this field. It seeks to understand the present context in its richness and depth, especially human actions and practices, and reflect on these actions and practices theologically in order to learn from them and to shape them toward desired moral and theological ends (Osmer, 2014, p. 77).

Researching within the discipline of practical theology opens up many avenues of approach and so through the creation of my research proposal I investigated various methods (Cameron & Duce, 2013; Gilbert, 2008; Kinsella, 2006; Linhart, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Mason, 2002; O'Leary, 2004; Silverman, 1993; Smith, 2008; Swinton & Mowat, 2006). I found two established approaches, hermeneutical theory and phenomenology, that deserved further exploration as they sought to understand both phenomenon and how individuals or groups interpret their experiences. Both of these approaches have carried a long association with practical theology. Brown, through her chapter on hermeneutical theory, outlines the changes and progression of this approach in its "function as both an informing perspective and a rich methodological resource" (Brown, 2012, p. 112), holding closely to an interpretive approach but not limited to a text

interpretation. Of particular note is the work of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur (Brown, 2012; Osmer, 2008), opening up the discussion on “human as inherently “hermeneutical” beings, engaged in the already interpreted world into which human beings are born and socialized”(Osmer, 2008, p. 21). As Brown states “[i]nterpretation matters to practical theologians” (2012, p. 112). The phenomenological approach also emphasises interpretation and generally deals with people’s perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, focusing on how life is experienced (Denscombe, 2014). Graham, in her work outlined in *Transforming Practice*, advocates for a “critical phenomenology of pastoral practice” (2002, p. 209) recognising the interpretive nature of practical theology. As such this line of enquiry,

excavates the horizons of value embodied in all intentional practices of faith and evaluates their continuity with historic forms of praxis, their appropriateness for the complexity of human experience and their viability as public and communitarian forms of practical wisdom (Graham, 2002, p. 209).

However, it was the combination of these two approaches that formed the best home for my research as neither one alone sufficed. “By drawing together hermeneutics and phenomenology . . . it is possible to capture something of the essence of the experience . . . In a way that would be illuminative and transformative” (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 102). As Goble states “hermeneutic phenomenology has not a set method” (Goble & Yin Yin, 2014; Van Manen, 1990, 2014) allowing each researcher to devise an approach suitable for the study at hand. Though O’Leary (2004) acknowledges that the lack of clear guidance can be problematic, this allowed me to devise a tailored process to explore the lived experiences of youth ministry practitioners. “The purpose of hermeneutic phenomenological research is to bring to light and reflect upon the lived meaning of this basic experience” (Goble & Yin Yin, 2014). Furthermore, as Kinsella articulates, there is an exchange that happens when embracing hermeneutics “to seek understanding, rather than explanation”, connecting to my motif of uncovering and

the need to see significance in the text before us through the manner of sympathetic engagement (Kinsella, 2006), again connecting to my second motif of honouring. As Gadamer succinctly says “let things speak” (cited in Misgeld, Nicholson, Schmidt, & Reuss, 1992, p. 65). Therefore, this approach enabled me to study deeply the words and themes of the participants, allowing “previously hidden life experiences and narratives to come to the fore and develop a public voice” (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 33). This is an approach that further facilitates my engagement with practical theology as I consider what faithful performance and faithful participation (Swinton & Mowat, 2006) look like in youth ministry. Thus holding to my themes of uncovering and honouring, alongside building on my own previous studies in psychology at undergraduate level, I found engaging in hermeneutical phenomenology an effective space to engage in data collection and analysis.

With my methodological approach in place, the next step was data collection. Consequently, marked by this importance of deep listening and participative engagement, I chose to engage in the qualitative interviewing route of data collection. This presented a robust means of data collection through keeping the participants’ words and thoughts at the fore and allowing effective space for clarification. More importantly, it provided a highly effective means of participant engagement, which as I have stated is of deep value to this exploration. In researching interview processes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; O’Leary, 2004; Silverman, 2013), I found my work connecting with the reflective interviewing perspectives of Roulston (2010) as I sought to embrace genuine interview interaction to aid the collection of data. Roulston (2010, p. 56) recognised the romantic concept of interviewing (Alvesson, 2003) as a helpful tool when building rapport or where rapport already exists and extracting and engaging in reflective practices on behalf of both either participants and the researcher. Roulston, citing Dinkins, notes how the interviewer and interviewee “engage in a dialogue through questions and responses that encourage the researcher and co-inquirer to reflect on the concepts that are emerging and taking shape within the interview itself” (Roulston, 2010, p. 18). This process allowed for genuine trust and connection and

as such brings an authenticity to this process where professional relationships exist between the researcher and the participants. My hope was that good rapport alongside effective reflexivity would allow for better data. Furthermore, I wanted to honour this trust, through effectively managing the interview process, holding to times and keeping the participants informed throughout (O'Leary, 2004).

Identifying who to involve and what to ask

As I have stated, the aim of my research is to uncover how Northern Irish practitioners understand youth ministry; to consider their experience, what they value, and to see if there is clarity regarding the function and direction of youth ministry. To uncover participants' understanding, I wanted to include a cross-section of youth practitioners and actively sought a strong mix across church types, locations and length of service. I kept the invitation to those operating within the evangelical Protestant sector.¹⁸

With a view to identifying practices and values, I wanted to get participants talking about what they do, and how practitioners describe their role and activities so as to uncover operant and espoused theology (Cameron & Duce, 2013) or as Swinton and Mowat identify, faithful performance and faithful participation (2006, p. 4 and 6).

I am aware behind my questioning is the clash of ideas around the nature of youth ministry globally (Clark, 2008a; Dean, 2000; Dean, Clark, & Rahn, 2001; Gray, 2007; Root, 2009a). Therefore, it was important to this study to unearth practitioners' thinking and practice to help identify if youth ministry in Northern Ireland is indeed as Dean (2000, 2010b) has argued, overly driven by the social sciences, as well as test the very nature of practical theology as a "hermeneutical discipline" (Root,

¹⁸ With a larger sample, it would be interesting to include both Catholic and Protestant participants opening up possibilities for future research but I knew for this piece, some parameters had to be in place so I could concentrate on the set aims and not overstate findings on a small sub-section of the overall sample.

2009a). As Osmer (2008, p. 240) recognises, practical theology is not “self-enclosed” and interacts and engages with other disciplines with ease. Subsequently, as I am trying to unearth the *Northern Irish* flavour of youth ministry, I am deeply interested in the connections across practitioners, to uncover a community flavour, the “praxis of the community” (Fowler, 1985, p. 50) further emphasised in the work of Clark (2008b), if indeed one exists.

With all this in mind I drafted thematic areas and questions to explore in a semi-structured interview process. I created an initial list of nine questions probing into what practitioners do, how they see what they do, the Northern Ireland context, theology and future. I opted for open questions, with the use of ‘probes’ or follow-up questions as required and engaged in self-awareness and self-regulation (Collins & Cooper, 2014) throughout to enhance the data gathering. Smith suggested the use of semi-structured interviews with the use of open questions, probes or prompts, (Smith, 2008, pp. 60-63; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, pp. 59-61) again connecting with my approach and intervention, as I am trying to consider what is beneath what youth ministry practitioners do and the values and ideas that are steering their practice.

Before my pilot process, I tested these questions through self-interviewing as part of my reflective practice piece for stage one of the Doctor of Professional Studies in Practical Theology process, typing my response to each question to create a transcript of data. This was beneficial on two accounts. It gave me the chance to test questions, to see if they made sense and what types of answers they elucidated but it also offered a structure to push into my own assumptions, ideas and hunches around youth ministry.¹⁹ This process, as I stated in the reflective practice essay, allowed the intentional space “to hone my ability to notice the details and appreciate the nuances of the “I” in this piece of research” (portfolio, 2014, p.8).

¹⁹ As Osmer states, “[m]any researchers also find it helpful to describe their own subjective responses and hunches. They become an outsider to themselves, standing back and describing their own experience. Not only does this help them become aware of their own view point, but it also is a source of data in its own right. This internal dialogue offers clues about matters that may need attention” (2008, p. 59).

For example, I noticed that particular question areas caught my passion or energy, exposing these as important lines of inquiry and therefore the need to allow participants space to answer particularly questions around the nature of youth ministry was elevated. The process also helpfully exposed some flaws, so I reduced my questions to seven and re-ordered them to allow for a better flow in both conversation and process of thought.²⁰

Interview process

The process of interviewing began with piloting two semi-structured interviews, one with a practitioner in a church setting and one with a practitioner in a parachurch setting. Through completing two pilot interviews, this allowed me to consider information sent to participants prior to the interviews, an opportunity to further test the questions, become familiar with the recording equipment and trial the process both with regard to the interviews but also transcribing. At the end of these two interviews, I asked for some feedback regarding the questions used and any suggested changes, as well as who they would suggest I talk to. This was helpful; participants found the questions made sense, it was beneficial to have questions in advance and the only change was the addition of the question, 'why did you choose these as your highlights or successes'?

I then sought out further participants through network sampling (Mason, 2002; O'Leary, 2004). I initially set out to interview six (that is, half my sample) who have been involved in youth ministry for less than ten years and a further six, who have been involved in youth ministry for over ten years, again to allow for varied experience in practice. The sample was created from a mix of personal contacts and suggestions from the participants, as I wanted to make sure there was a variety of

²⁰ As I reflected on the phases of the self-interview process, within my reflective practice piece, I noted that it "was an intense experience as it called for heightened response and a deeper level of recollection for both story and beliefs . . . first couple of questions were about 'a warming up', middle questions evoked a lot of energy and passion and towards the end I was tired and finding it hard to keep responding at the same high level" (portfolio, 2014, p.14).

contexts and practitioners. I initially contacted potential participants through email, receiving responses from all but one query.

To complement the honouring of practitioners, in line with ethical integrity, I went with a process-driven model of consent (Gregory, 2003, p. 43) which further allowed participants to speak in and influence the data process. As expected, this involved detailed information sheets and consent forms but, interestingly, when it came to levels of subsequent information, requests were extremely low. No-one asked for the draft transcripts and all chose for their names not be changed or anonymised. This last detail did surprise me, though possibly reflects the professional nature of the discourse and the trust participants had in the process itself and my ability as a researcher. This decision further compounded my desire to accurately reflect on each of the participants' contribution. (Information sheets and consent forms can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B).

I visited each of the participants in a location that suited them, two in their home, seven in their place of work and three chose to meet me at my office. All the participants were asked the same seven core open questions, alongside probes or follow-up questions as required. In the main, all of the participants answered most of the questions, which meant I could compare responses to specific questions, proving incredibly helpful. Also, at the end of the interview, I would give every participant the opportunity to feedback any further thoughts as a means of "member checking" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 115), to return to previous questions, suggest additional questions and potential participants, seeking at each stage to give them space to enter into the research.

I interviewed twelve participants in total from within the Protestant evangelical sector and all in full-time employment focused on working with young people.²¹ (The interviews ranged from 36 minutes to 69 minutes, averaging 55 minutes in

²¹ The Faith Based Youth Work Research Report (Macaulay & Youthnet, 2006) identified 160 Full Time Youth Workers registered in faith/church-based groups. 43.2 % of Registered Full Time Youth Workers were working in faith/church-based groups. As such, twelve participants provided meaningful insight into the sector.

length.) For those involved, it was evident that all of the participants had a youth focus remit. This might seem an obvious statement to make but the mandate and the actualities of their role underlined this; also, nine of twelve participants had Youth in their job title. Eight were employed in a church setting (across Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Church of Ireland and new church contexts) and four were employed in a parachurch setting. In the main, their working experience was Northern Irish based and all were educated to Third Level. The participants carried a range of experience, from three years to twenty-three years, but the final breakdown was a larger proportion of those with over six years' experience, averaging nine years' full-time experience. I hope this will add to the understanding of youth ministry and bring additional depth to my findings. Four were female and eight were male. I was intentional about not having a fifty-fifty split as I have noticed a higher percentage of male leaders across this sector and, indeed, as I would ask participants who they would recommend I should interview, more males were suggested than female; this is a reflection of who is in post as opposed to necessarily a bias from the participants. This split did allow a good response from across the genders and I took note of the weight of this when listening to the data, as I explain later in this chapter. Also of note is the geographical spread. Participants came from north, south, east and west areas of Northern Ireland, six from County Antrim, three from County Down, two from County Londonderry, one from County Armagh; and of the twelve interviewed, four were based in Belfast. This spread was important to include those working in inner-city settings and suburbs, rural areas and across segregated and mixed areas of housing.

Interestingly, an encouraging consequence of this process was at the end of several of the interviews, participants thanked me for the time, affirming that the questions themselves had been thought-provoking and helpful to their own practice. This was an unexpected outcome and evidences the connection that can happen across interviewing (Oliver, 2003, p. 57) and the reflective nature of the interview process resulting in "reactionary empowerment" as suggested by Calderhead and Gates (as referenced in Moon, 1999, p. 55). It also exemplifies the interview as a cathartic and welcomed process, through the openness of the participants, their trust in me and

what was shared. Furthermore, connecting with my own experience that the “very nature of questioning can create moments of illumination” as cited in my previous work (portfolio, 2014, p.26).

Data analysis

The next process to outline is data analysis. It would be misleading to suggest that data analysis – or more specifically thematic analysis – started after the interview process and transcribing was complete. Rather it was a more iterative process of seven stages, noting some correlation with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six stages of thematic analysis, as I sifted through my data set for patterns. I am aware the active thematic analysis took on more depth at the third stage but the first two were important in the beginning to familiarise myself with the data. Through engaging in a process of inductive analysis through thematic analysis alongside dialogical reflection (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 118),²² my hope was to note words, concepts, linguistic devices,²³ looking for interconnectedness (O’Leary, 2004, pp. 196-198) and uncovering patterns, themes and categories in my data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 156; Roulston, 2010).²⁴ Cognisant of the hermeneutical phenomenology method and also an intentional theological intervention, I built my approach from Van Manen’s examples of researching lived experience (Van Manen, 1990) and thematic analysis (Van Manen, 2014) alongside insights on this method from Kinsella (2006), Roulston (2010), Smith (2008) and Swinton and Mowat (2006), creating a tailored approach to reveal how practitioners experience and understand youth ministry.

²² Dialogical reflection is described as this “moving between the extrapolated themes (the parts) and the text as a whole (the hermeneutical circle) in order to check the authenticity of the themes, and to develop a deeper, fuller understanding of the meaning that was expressed by the research participants” (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 118-119).

²³ O’Leary refers to linguistic devices as metaphors, analogies and even proverbs (2004, p. 197).

²⁴ This the same process I outlined in my Research Proposal (portfolio, 2014).

Data analysis started with the interviews themselves, recognising “that an implicit, intuitive process of theological reflection is already taking place in the processes of observation and reflection” (McGrath, 2012, p. 115). At this stage, alongside listening to the participants, I took notes, logging key emotions, for example when the participant was particularly passionate in responding to a question and noting some highlights in response in this first stage of interaction.

The second stage was the transcribing itself. All twelve interviews were transcribed. I chose to transcribe the interview like a script, transcribing verbatim, including pauses, noting any expressions of emotion, for example, laughter and correlating this with my interview summary notes. Listening to the advice of Bird (2005) and Poland in Gubrium and Holstein (2001), I tried my best to capture the participant’s manner as well as their words, to allow for better meaning to be extracted and also in my desire to honour the participants. I wanted to capture ‘them’.

The first two transcripts were completed at the pilot process stage, allowing for both further appreciation of the interview data but also the transcribing process. Once all interviews and transcripts were complete, the data was split in two ways, which I refer to as warp and weft. Warp was each complete interview transcript on its own. Weft was collating responses from every respondent to each question, that is, joining together sections of the transcripts across each of the question responses. I chose this approach to allow me to engage with this volume of data effectively and to keep engagement fresh, conscious that the need to “attend” (Osmer, 2008) did not stop at the interview process.

This third phase involved engagement via the questions, analysing what was said in response to each of the questions (my weft analysis). This was incredibly helpful to see any overlaps, to note sections of interest and to then re-read these sections and lift quotes for themes. This repeated reading of the data was essential, not just to familiarise oneself with the data but as stated to actively engage with it. During this stage, repeated phrases and ideas were collected, sifting through the data again

and again to note common threads and using Graham's phrase "bonds of affinity" (Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005, p. 190) across this community of participants.

The fourth stage was engaging via each participant's response (warp analysis), deepening engagement through hermeneutic phenomenology, reading transcripts noting the double hermeneutic approach, alongside reading the interview summary sheets that were captured at stage one. This process was repeated several times, re-reading and taking note of themes and areas of interests recorded in a summary sheet for each participant.

Initially, I explored Van Manen's suggestions on theme analysis (2014, p. 320). He suggested a three-pronged read of the text, beginning with holistic reading, where one tries to capture the text in a phrase, to selective reading, noticing what statements or phrases are particularly revealing and then detailed reading, where one actively engages with the text, sentence by sentence. As I was aware that I had a considerable number of sentences before me, this approach seemed limited if I were to truly engage with participants' words and meanings within the allotted time frame of doctoral research. Consequently embracing Smith and Osborn's approach of a two-stage process, a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2008, p. 51) proved a stronger fit in both process and in tone. This allowed for an investigation that tries to uncover professional perceptions, alongside how participants are making sense of their world, as in ministry, recognising there is often an overlap between professional and personal due to the intertwined nature of faith and vocation. This double hermeneutic approach, hearing the participants and interpreting the participants, worked effectively with a free textual analysis (Smith, 2008). On the interview transcripts, I would note in the left-hand margin interesting or significant comments and then use the right-hand margin to note emerging themes further supplemented by my own warp and weft approach. I read and re-read transcripts from each participant firstly as a whole interview text (warp) and then compared responses across questions (weft). The use of similar questions and themes allowed for this comparison and resulted in a cohesive body of data and results.

The fifth stage involved an interaction of the sections of interest in stage three and the double hermeneutic and summary sheets of stage four revealing key themes. I engaged in “dialogical reflection, moving between the extrapolated themes (the parts) and the text as a whole (the hermeneutical circle)” (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 118). I further tested the emerging themes through spider diagrams and free writing and then edited writing, all to ensure the validity of my arguments. This stage involved much repetitive engagement to make sure that themes of interest were in fact referenced by multiple participants and not simply one voice, or that I had indeed ‘over-listened’ to particular participant. For example, recognising the power dynamics that can occur (Collins & Cooper, 2014), I was aware there were more male than female participants in my sample, so I had to ask, and keep asking: had I over-listened to the male participants? This use of intrusive questions at all stages of the analysis was incredibly important as themes materialised so as a researcher one can have growing credibility for what is emerging.

A further sifting took place at stage six, through work-in-progress presentations and subsequent discussions, allowing data themes to be tested and to see if my evidence held.²⁵ Then stage seven concluded the process with a further condensing of themes, to two to three strong emergent themes.

Due to the richness of the data, I did not proceed with a focus group as I had originally planned, as the interviews themselves and subsequent data analysis unearthed fascinating insights to youth ministry with plenty of crossover on themes and values. The analysis method adopted alongside active reflexivity throughout kept my own potential bias in check again making the initial need for the focus group redundant.

²⁵ Work-in-progress presentations were opportunities at the Professional Doctorate learning residencies to formally share updates on my research with a smaller cohort. This process proved helpful to me, in both creating the space to articulate ideas but also uncovering blind spots in my work through the subsequent questions and feedback.

The theological task of this thesis

Before I conclude this chapter, it is important to acknowledge a tension that emerged, that of holding to the theological task of this thesis. Through the process of reflecting on the findings, I found a tension in connecting the theological nature of this inquiry with relevant writing and research, as the plethora of connected writing from the social sciences could have easily outweighed the theological. This was a tension faced not just within youth ministry (Dean, 2010b) but across practical theology (Pattison, 2007, Root, 2014a and Ward, 2017).

“Practical theology’s commitment to the lived and embodies realities of concrete persons and communities seems to draw practical theology like a magnet toward conversations with philosophy, the social sciences, and forms of empirical research” (Root, 2014a, p. x). This also connects with Pattison’s concerns regarding the “many opportunities and pitfalls in interdisciplinary work, not least the danger of ceasing to think about theology at all” (Pattison, 2007, p. 245).

“If practical theology is to be *practical* (attending to concrete experience) but yet *theological*, then it must make central the encounter of divine and human action” (Root, 2014, p. 8) or as Ward states “develop a way of doing practical theology that is fundamentally ecclesial and theological in nature” (2017, p. 3).

Therefore, as I responded to this dilemma in understanding youth ministry and being appreciative of the wider dilemma facing practical theology with regards to how we hold to a theological enquiry, I found McGrath’s practice of “theological attentiveness” (2012, p. 108) helpful. McGrath, drawing on the work of Brown, Ryan, and Creswell (2007), describes attentiveness as “the disciplined habit of developing ways of seeing or envisaging reality” (2012, p. 111). This attentiveness is cultivated through doing, recognising the theological schema is already at play in the Christian observer, subtly influencing what is observed and the responses. “What is additionally required here is the *intentional* development of rigorous and principled habits of thought and action that enable such implicit reflection to be

explicit and principled” (McGrath, 2012, p. 116). Interestingly, McGrath advocates for the study of attitudes, values and practices of the Christian community to see if they are indeed distinctive and “then to identify courses of action to ensure that its identity is safeguarded and appropriately embodied”(2012, p. 123).

This indeed describes well the nature of this research inquiry and both the inquiry into practitioners’ attitudes and values as well as the nature of their practice, ministry itself. The theological task of this thesis required an attentiveness that is willing to engage with the divine action articulated in the interviews, considering a “theology that is relational and that starts with encounter and wonder” (Ward, 2017, p. 7). Therefore, this need to support the theological nature of this inquiry was important to the success of the findings and the integrity of this research project as well as to the integrity of youth ministry.

Conclusion

In summary, the analysis stage was an incredibly rich and rewarding one and I hope that through articulating my analysis method this underlines, as O’Leary (2004, p. 115) suggests, the rigour of the research. In uncovering these practitioners’ understanding of youth ministry and their experience of youth ministry and how they interpret and understand that experience, I saw the words and practice of the participants paint a very lively and dynamic view of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. Their responses to the questions revealed a clarity of focus, a reflexivity and nuanced reflections on the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland.

This investigation revealed commonly held values across youth ministry practitioners that impacted the orientation of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. It underlined the significance of the practitioners themselves as to the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland and also the importance of taking time to listen to their ideas, reflections and stories. It connected the methodology of this research piece and the fruitfulness in exploring an often unheard voice, in that of the practitioner

themselves. This uncovering and honouring opened up a richness to youth ministry in Northern Ireland. The dominant themes that emerged were with regard to underlying values and influence of context and an emerging manner of work with young people, that exemplified a deep commitment on the part of practitioners to young people and integrated faith and practice. In the next two chapters I will expand on the results of my analysis and give weight and time to the core findings.

Chapter Three: Practitioners' values

"I pour a lot of who I am into my role . . . and that comes from my theology, faith, you know all those things are wrapped up" (Laura H.).

Two guiding motifs, uncovering and honouring, as I have outlined in the previous methodology chapter, dominated this research journey. As these two directional themes focus on the practitioners themselves, a previously silent perspective is revealed that is central to gaining an understanding of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. Through uncovering how practitioners see themselves, how they see young people, how they see their ministry, and in fact how these perspectives interact, this has resulted in further exposing commonalities in priorities and approach to youth ministry, captured in the identification of values.

Through this chapter I will show how the prioritising of *their* words and ideas, created an awareness as a researcher and active listener to not just what is being said, but how it is being said. In fact, this noting of content and the tone of language alongside how participants interpret their experiences revealed a recurring cluster of ideas around that of values, consequently, uncovering areas of underlying importance to these practitioners and also displaying these practitioners' reflexivity. Moreover, this excavation revealed the existence and influence of two dominant values held by the practitioners, a personal and deeply held sense of vocation and a high regard for the Bible.

Therefore, in this chapter, after introducing the practitioners, I would like to explore these two values, considering how they influence these practitioners and their practice and then confirming both values as core and motivating characteristics in the distinctive nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. I will also illustrate how

the particular values uncovered clash with previous scholarship and practice, that claimed youth ministry to be biblically and theologically light.

The practitioners

Twelve youth ministry practitioners were involved in the data-gathering process pertaining to establishing the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. Therefore, at the start it is important to emphasise the type of practitioner being referred to throughout this research. Rixon (2007) acknowledges the variety of roles and settings in which practitioners operate, recognising the range of professional backgrounds many come from in their interaction with young people. For the purposes of this research, the term practitioner used throughout this thesis refers to those who are operating in a professional youth ministry capacity.

The practitioners involved in this research were included from as wide a variety of environments as possible, ranging across geographical settings in Northern Ireland, as well as employment settings. Seven of the twelve practitioners interviewed worked directly for a local church, two for local communities, one was employed regionally, and two were operating nationally. Together, they represented the Protestant evangelical spread in Northern Ireland, working in three Presbyterian churches, one Methodist church, one Baptist church, one Church of Ireland church, one Vineyard church, one Independent church, three interdenominational evangelical parachurch agencies and one community Christian youth charity, which was also connected with the Methodist church. These practitioners worked with young people in urban and rural settings, in the inner city and suburbs and with both middle and working-class communities.

The locality of the practitioners spanned across four of the six counties of Northern Ireland. When looking at these localities alongside census data it revealed that the practitioners came from the densely populated parts of the country (Office for National Statistics, 2012) and also in the main, more Protestant, populated areas

(Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency NISRA, 2014, pp. 84-85), with the exception of Londonderry, where one of the practitioners was based. This connection with more Protestant areas is not surprising as the remit of the research is that of Protestant-based youth ministry. However, through highlighting the population clusters it also reveals the ongoing segregated nature of life in Northern Ireland, an issue to which I will return in the next chapter.

Regarding local context and knowledge, those interviewed have mainly spent their time living and working in Northern Ireland, averaging nine years full-time experience in youth ministry. As a result, they acknowledged in their reflections, that their experience was Northern Ireland orientated.²⁶ This could be perceived as a cultural bias in research, due to the lack of exposure to different contexts but as the aim of this research is to unearth the thinking and practice of practitioners in Northern Ireland, their experience in this locality is important. Furthermore, the impact of any bias is tested through considering these practitioners' reflexivity, which is highlighted throughout the thesis. Also of note is that all of the participants were educated to at least tertiary level, with at least half holding a theology or youth degree qualification.

Those practitioners who worked directly for a church, carried titles such as Youth Pastor, Youth Associate, Youth worker, Youth and Family Worker and Youth Officer. There was no pattern regarding titles used, nor any particular association regarding denomination. Youth Pastor was the most common title, used across Methodist, Baptist, Independent and Vineyard church contexts. For those practitioners who worked in the charity or parachurch context, their titles reflected the further specialism of their work, capturing a coordination or further leadership aspect, for example, Director, Schools worker, Centre co-ordinator or Youth and Community Development worker. This variety of titles reflects my observations highlighted in

²⁶ Two of the twelve practitioners studied in England, two have been involved in camps in Europe or North America and only one has spent any significant time living outside of Northern Ireland, working for four years in North America.

chapter one, regarding the range of descriptions for those in youth ministry, concurring with Clyne's research (2008).

Most practitioners shared of the development in their roles and responsibilities during their time in their posts and interestingly three of the seven practitioners who worked in a local church began in part-time roles that expanded to now full-time positions. As they spoke of what their roles entailed, there were three main areas captured: first, direct work with young people; second, supporting volunteers and interns; and third, work with the local community.

The first of these, direct work with young people, was the priority and in fact the key motivator in their ministry, as I will outline later in this chapter. In the main, these practitioners would spend time with young people most working days. The first context was within planned programmes, ranging from youth club or drop-in activity to youth fellowship type groups. (Uniformed organisations were mentioned though tended to be run by volunteers, not by the practitioners.) The second context was individual, one-to-one mentoring, coffees meetings or formal pastoral support, as practitioners walked with young people both in the ordinary and amidst difficult situations. The importance of these individual relational connections was highly valued by the participants. The third context was bigger events, ranging from weekly Sunday gatherings focused on young people, to the more *ad hoc* residential or special events such as those run at Christmas, Easter or during the summer holidays. It is worth noting that some of the practitioners were also involved with children's work; for example, children's clubs, holiday Bible clubs and mothers and toddlers programmes. This was seen as a way of connecting provision across the ages, strengthening links with families and not leaving that relational connection until the teenage years.

The second aspect, supporting volunteers, interns or staff, reflected a team aspect of youth ministry. None of these practitioners worked alone. A few of the participants were fully responsible for managing their projects, including fundraising, budget planning, staff recruitment and staff development. However,

for a further significant proportion, managing and supporting volunteers and interns was a key responsibility. This role was evident as they assisted others through training, resource provision and personal support or management. Alongside the in-house exchanges, there were also examples of practitioners networking with other youth staff, church leaders and volunteers in their area or across their organisational or denominational links.

Though the activities or meetings ran mainly in the church or parachurch buildings, each of the practitioners spoke of work and connections reaching beyond their context, highlighting the third aspect, work with the local community. Outside of mentioning connections with parents, the school context was the most common area for community engagement. Practitioners offered practical help in schools, with reading and writing skills, they were involved with sports coaching (both formal and informal), would lead school assemblies and teach in RE lessons, as well as organise events for pupils and teachers.

Altogether this spread of localities, experience and engagement in the Northern Ireland scene, alongside open, insightful and reflective practitioners, created a firm foundation on which to consider emerging themes or patterns with regard to youth ministry. The work of these practitioners, the programmes, the informal conversations, captured a discipling and pastoral aspect of their ministry, alongside a priority towards those young people outside of the church or outside of a faith community.

The activities and practices of these practitioners reflected strong skills in communication, through talks delivered, small group facilitation, alongside written reports to church elders or staff teams. Relationship building abilities, and interpersonal skills were also evident, especially with young people but also across work with volunteers, with parents or guardians and those in the local community. Furthermore, significant leadership capability was apparent, whether this was in coordinating the volunteer teams or bringing oversight to the work at large. These

practitioners also evidenced strategic skills as they spoke of outworking vision, creating strategy and plans or designing curriculums.

However, as these practitioners spoke and the subsequent analysis revealed, it was not activity that dominated the data but rather it was the underlying and motivational nature of values. Furthermore the data revealed the dominance of values underpinning these practitioners' activity, common values that shaped priorities in practice, which I will expand on in the next section.

Uncovering values

The impact of values on work or vocation is not a new concept, as I will later connect with the work of Banks (2010; 2016), Miller (2007) and Stackhouse (2008) but interestingly literature around the topic of youth ministry and values is scarce. There is some work proposing values. For example, the work of Snailum (2012) encourages the establishment of intergenerational community as a core value, or the research of Myers and Jackson (2008) advocates for the value of service learning as integral to youth ministry's future. However, none explicitly considers either the values underpinning youth ministry or the values held by practitioners. Therefore the findings of this research add new insight into both the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland and fresh revelation as to what practitioners value.

Two values dominated the findings of this research, a personal and deeply held sense of vocation and a high regard for the Bible. The existence of these common values revealed a cohesion to youth ministry in Northern Ireland that contradicts the confusion highlighted in the literature in chapter one and elucidates the particular nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. However, before I explore these values and their implications, it is helpful to clarify what I mean by this term value.

There can be some confusion around the language of values, as the work of Parks and Guay (2009) and Corney (2004) outline. For example, Corney (2004) highlights implicit or explicit values and the work of Parks and Guay (2009) explores values as guiding principles or values as attitudinal preferences. The power of values is also echoed in the work of Unger (1990) who explores common shared values and how these move us towards our aims and objectives and towards the people we care about. What is agreed and evidenced across this scholarship is the motivational impact of values. This influence of values links with the core inquiry of this research, as I seek to provide a deeper understanding as to what is beneath youth ministry practice and as such contributes to the uncovering of the Northern Irish nature of youth ministry. Furthermore, the motivational nature of values connects with the passion and energy articulated in the interviews with these practitioners and the stories they shared, illustrating the power of personal narratives.

Though my research is not solely narrative, the conversational nature of this inquiry resulted in the sharing of stories or narratives, and also revealed what I will term 'mini-narratives' as words hint or nod to underlying stories and beliefs throughout this process. Together these stories and mini-narratives opened pathways to appreciate youth ministry. Graham's work also recognised the role of narrative within practical theology and how it can act as helpful sources of understanding:

Anyone dealing with the realms of human value, meaning and understanding recognises that levels of interpretation are unavoidable; research methodologies take account of the 'storied' and hermeneutical nature of human culture. This is both an individual process of formation but also one that is shared within particular communities of practice (Graham, 2017, p. 175).

This role in giving exposure to these expressed lived experiences is crucial, as echoed in the work of Ganzevoort (2011), Dreyer (2014) and Yamane (2000). Ganzevoort states, "theological reflection on religious practices has therefore always been reflection on the convergences, confluences and conflicts between the

myriads of stories” (2011, p. 214). Thus as practitioners talked about their practice and their praxis, it unearthed a reflexivity, uncovering underlining meanings, and associated values. As Graham outlines, (including citations from (Stoddart, 2014):

Practice denotes the ‘embodied expression of particular kinds of knowledge.’ Whereas ‘practice’ may denote something quite routinized and unreflective, the term ‘praxis’ points towards something that is more reflexive, that is both value-directed and value-laden. It is the meanings we bring to practice and the meaning-making associated with our actions (Graham, 2017, p. 173).

This power of appreciating the personal narratives is not simply to underline an attentiveness to what is being shared and connecting with the methodology created to understand these lived experiences, but it actually exposes common threads across the narratives that allow for a connection across story and practice. This is seen in the work of Price (2015) as he considers the “power of the individual practitioner’s narrative capital as a resource for their personalised professionalism” (2015, p. 145). Thus through this research I wish to notice how the individual narratives point toward a shared narrative of youth ministry. Therefore, throughout this chapter, I will present the practitioners’ words and stories to exemplify and underline these findings recognising “[h]uman beings are storytellers by nature” (McAdams, 1993, p. 27). This use of practitioners’ voices is intentional in aiding the uncovering of this aspect of youth ministry, and is used also as a means to illustrate the commitment to both young people and youth ministry that marked these interviews.

Hence in summary, having established the importance of values to this inquiry, I now wish to explore the two dominating values uncovered, giving evidence to the significance of these and considering if they create epistemological insight. Furthermore, in considering these expressed values, I hope to establish priorities of practice and uncover a “praxis of community” (Fowler, 1985, p. 50) for those in youth ministry. Likewise, to aid the excavation of the underlining epistemological

viewpoints of practitioners, I will give intentional space in this chapter to sharing more of the practitioners' own voices.

Dominant values

As stated, two dominant values emerged, regarding how practitioners saw their role and also their personal and professional regard for the Bible. In this section I will explore each of these, illustrating how they are understood and experienced. As I consider each of the dominant values, I will interact with practitioners' comments and reflections, as well as connecting with related literature and thinking, highlighting what this reveals as to the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland.

Personal vocation

The first dominant value centred around personal vocation and how these practitioners saw their role, the importance of the job, their ministry and the young people they work with. This was apparent as practitioners spoke of what they do, revealing an important layer to the 'why' beneath their practice. As illustrated through the words Nicole shares, "it's not a job, it's, it is ministry, it is a calling."

It is not surprising to discover that youth ministry practitioners care about young people, however, what is surprising is how little is written in youth ministry literature regarding vocation and an expressed sense of call. This growing Northern Ireland youth ministry accent reveals not just priorities of practice within this context but draws light on, and subsequently evidences, the deeply held personal commitment of those in youth ministry.

To adequately explore the practitioners' sense of vocation and call, it is important to note that a sense of calling can flow from faith and also can operate outside of faith. Stackhouse acknowledges vocation as "the divine calling to be a Christian in

every mode of life is to show something of what it means to be a (redeemed and renewed) human being as well” (2008, p. 222). However, this can be juxtaposed with the interesting research into the outworking of vocation as a sense of calling without connection to faith, as seen in the work of Dik, Duffy, and Eldridge (2009) with regards to counselling or in the research of Duffy, Manuel, Borges, and Bott (2011) with medical students. Consequently, this raises lines of inquiry as to what do these youth ministry practitioners mean by the use of the word ‘call’. The concept of call as a sense of called purpose was echoed across the data, though always in association with faith. For example, Colleen shared, “for me it’s just going back to that place of knowing it’s where God has anointed you and called you.”

The work of Larrivee and Mattison, and Parisi also provides helpful frameworks to unpack what these practitioners are articulating with regards to vocation. Larrivee (2007) outlines a vision for vocation, that is not limited to task but rather a concept that guides, which he refers to as an “approach to work mind-set.” “This way of thinking about vocation includes the concept of being called to a position but also provides needed direction about what to do and how we are to work in any position” (Larrivee, 2007, p. 78). This view is echoed in the work of Mattison and Parisi (2007):

A vocation is more than what we do; it concerns who we are. It entails a transformation, whereby our actions not only have an impact on the world around us but also reflect who we are and further shape our very selves (Mattison & Parisi, 2007, p. 49).

Price refers to this as “integrated sense of self” (2015, p. 145) and his research with youth practitioners (though not specifically youth ministry) also portrays an “articulated sense of passion and commitment to their work” (Price, 2015, p. 2).

However, it is David Bailey’s (2013) term “theological shorthand” that is a helpful tool to recognise the layered meanings that simple phrases communicate. Consequently, in this context, practitioners' shorthand of the word “calling”, I

propose, refers to a vocational outworking of faith that is personal and particular: personal with regards to the individual and particular with regards to youth ministry.

In exploring this value of personal vocation, we can see a weaving of personal faith that underlines this motivation and commitment. As Laura H. articulates, “there is nothing better than talking about the Father heart of God” or as Pete T. shares, “there is a deeper sense of kingdom for me . . . in why I do that and the sense of it is not just filling time with young people but there’s other reasons, positive life affirming reasons for them.”

As practitioners share their deep-seated passion for their work, their integration of faith and their commitment to young people and their ministry is noteworthy. I would suggest this can be further explored on two levels, a personal outworking of one’s faith in the everyday, and a professional calling and outworking of vocation.

This personal outworking of one’s faith has been helpfully clarified by Bouma-Prediger; of the four kinds of integration he identifies, the faith-praxis integration is the most relevant:

[F]aith-praxis integration is a task that all people engage in as they attempt to live their lives in accord with what they take to be of ultimate or final importance . . . It is the attempt to direct one’s everyday life according to one’s faith-informed word view (Bouma-Prediger, 1990, p. 27).

Sites, Garzon, Milacci and Boothe (2009) work in education, also illustrates this explicit integration of faith and practice and a connecting of being and practice. They too highlighted an “ontological foundation” (Sites et al., 2009, p. 36).

Regarding the professional calling and outworking of vocation, Sarah Banks’ work (2010, 2016) around ethics and integrity is of interest and though her intervention is within the social work context, I think there is a strong resonance with ministry and

with the findings of my research, particularly around the construction of professional integrity as “acting upon a deeply held set of values” (Banks, 2010, p. 2170). Banks outlines various aspects of integrity though the one that is pertinent to this discussion is around integrity with regard to “standing for something” (Calhoun, 1995), which focuses on commitment. “Applied to professional life, this version of integrity entails practitioners being committed to sets of professional ideals/principles, which may go beyond extant professional norms” (Banks, 2010, p. 2171). This can be seen in the responses from these practitioners as they articulate personal stories and motivations towards their role and ministry. Extracts from two interviews are included below to illustrate this: Grant’s desire to create a space where anyone is welcome and Colleen’s appreciation of mess and complexity in the lives of young people and as such in working with them.

I always wanted to build a youth that was accepting to everyone no matter, like so we have loads of atheists, that, even if you don’t believe in Jesus you still come and you be involved and we still have the opportunity to share Jesus and the love of Him (Grant).

It’s just my natural bias is for the messy, it’s always going to be. God caught my heart for young people. I always said I would never work with young people and they weren’t for you and then I meet some and what I love about young people is their honesty (Colleen).

The tone of the work is slightly different for each practitioner but what we see is a personal engagement in their ministry, an outworking of this vocational calling and an integration in what they value and how they choose to work. Further research could open up a rich reservoir of thinking around why these values are important and even the personal narratives behind them but for now they underline their personal commitment to this practice.

Interestingly, Banks warns against the dangers of professional integrity, that commitments may become too personal or self-referential and not sufficiently

grounded in professional values and goals (Banks, 2010, p. 2179); she suggests the role of community to add balance:

To guard against this, it is important to retain the concept of a community of professional practitioners (and their commonly accepted standards of conduct) as a reference point, so that the cause being pursued is not purely personal or individual (Banks, 2010, p. 2179).

I would argue that community for and of professional youth ministry practitioners can be seen in a connection around faith integration. This embedded concept of vocation and calling connects across these practitioners' commonly held values and also in the association with the wider Christian faith body, coined by Pete W. as "the family of faith." This "family of faith" serves as a community for these practitioners.

It is also important to acknowledge that this personal commitment does not necessarily mean a uniquely held personal commitment but as Banks acknowledges, citing Calhoun (1995), "persons of integrity do not just act consistently with what they personally endorse; they stand up for their best judgement within a community of people trying to discover what in life is worth doing" (Banks, 2010, p. 2174). This commonly held commitment is evident in these practitioners' faithfulness to young people and the deep desire for their flourishing that flows from these practitioners' own sense of personal call. Thus, the research uncovers youth ministry in Northern Ireland that is inspired by the faith of the practitioners and worked out in a commitment to young people.

In the last couple of decades there has been an increased popularity in an intergenerational approach to youth ministry alongside an integration of youth with the whole congregation (Baker, 2008; Crispin, 2017; Kauffman et al., 2003; Weber & de Beer, 2016; Yaconelli, 1999). This has come about as a reaction to the imbalance that has been created in church life, due in part to the professionalism of youth ministry, causing a disengagement of parents in the faith formation of their

children, as well as a sub-division of youth-related projects across churches, often hiding and silencing the work with young people. As Baker states, “youth ministry is not a separate animal (as it is so often treated in mainline churches) but is intricately interwoven with the whole congregation” (Baker, 2008, p. 262). Thus, those in youth ministry have been encouraged to forge relationships with parents, with families, and move across age levels to engagement with children and students (Dean, 2010a; Kauffman et al., 2003; Snailum, 2012). Subsequently, there has been a rise in youth ministry roles with a focus on family or youth and children.

However, the evidence of this inquiry uncovers that the current expression of youth ministry in Northern Ireland remains with a youth focus. Youth ministry does indeed, as Rick describes, create “a unique setting as being available and present in young people’s lives.” This in no way undermines the sense of community engagement or work with parents, practitioners cited, but rather acknowledges that the core focus and remit is with young people themselves.

In many ways to state that youth ministry practitioners have a strong focus and commitment on young people is not news but this deep investment and care for young people needs to be underlined to honour the data and stories of participants. As such, Nicole’s statement captures the dominant spirit manifest and evident across the interviews: “[E]very encounter I have with a young person is a highlight because I just, that’s what I love, I just love being with them.”

This sentiment was echoed again and again, in how these practitioners talked about young people, often using the word or motif of love to describe how they see young people. For example, Craig shares that he “love[s] working directly with young people” and Laura E. states “my heart is . . . with young people” or as Phil passionately declares “my heart breaks . . . Find myself choking up, like how do you help them, how do you equip them.”

Throughout the data these practitioners’ comments evidenced a high regard for, and a joy in working with, young people, revealing a deeply personal investment

and engagement with young people. In fact, it is the changed lives of young people that epitomises success in youth ministry. (A factor I will return to in chapter four as I explore the redemptive nature of youth ministry and its impact on the lives of young people.) For instance, when practitioners were asked to share a highlight or a success in their youth ministry, the dominant response was to tell a story of a particular young person. For example, Pete T. shared of a teenager who had been involved with his team for a long time:

Chloe,²⁷ would have been involved with our programme when she was [at] primary school . . . and then when it came to first year just dropped off a bit . . . but . . . out of the blue came round about a year and a half ago and she was fourth year. Just popped into drop-in and . . . she basically hasn't left the centre since . . . whole idea of kindness and care was a massive influence on her at the start. And then just watching her build relationships . . . it's been incredible to see her been mentored, opening conversations about everything and anything in life . . . life is still really tough and continues to be tough, but just love her faith in God and she just loves worship music and she just comes in here and blasts it and she is learning to play the guitar and play the drums, just flourishing from somebody who probably would have had a wee bit of mental health issues and maybe had suicidal thoughts before to somebody who still understands that life is tough but actually has somebody to lean on and people to lean on, on the road with her. And wants to make a difference and dreams.

He then added "I just love, I love working with broken and vulnerable young people . . . I just get inspired by watching how others . . . journey with people and show them Jesus in such a simple way but it's life changing" (Pete T.).

²⁷ Name changed to anonymise young person.

These testimonies of relationship and change were echoed in Craig's example of a young leader and Nicole's story of a mission trip and its impact on one of the teenagers who connects with her programmes. Rick's highlight was of an intern:

[S]he came as someone who had loads of potential but had just never done this before and throughout the year . . . grew in things she was doing upfront, grew in confidence, probably had a tough time at the start because she had to lead girls who were close to her age and were her friends and people, by the end of the year, well throughout that year, I watched her grow and develop and almost gain all the tools and the skills that she needed to be able to do that and but probably actually the highlight has been this year of watching her flourish and because I feel like now whenever she is doing stuff, she is just, well she is just flourishing so that has been a massive highlight (Rick).

It is important to note that these practitioners also acknowledged the little stories they carry all the time; as Colleen says about each young person "every single one of them is a story" or echoed in the words from Nicole: "[T]here's so many wee moments . . . whether it's a conversation with the young people, where they've, something has just connected with them or it has just made sense or you've just seen them move that little step further" (Nicole).

The passion for this ministry and for these young people came across not just in the stories told but through their mini-narratives. The warmth with which they spoke, the energy with which they told a story, also communicated the significance and priority of young people to each of them. Interestingly this aspect, this deeply motivating aspect has been somewhat silent in the writing and research of youth ministry. Often it seems the focus is on what we do or how we might be better in our youth engagement. For example, in Senter's book *Four views of youth ministry and the church* (2001) the focus is on what we do, skipping the foundational aspect of why youth practitioners are engaging with young people. It would be remiss to imply this value doesn't exist, implicit in the work of Dean and Foster (1998) or

Clark (2011) or even Root's (2012) passionate plea to explore the roots of youth ministry. However, for the purposes of this research piece, it is important to acknowledge these practitioners' personal and collective commitment to young people and also to recognise the significant influence of this on vocation and praxis. Therefore, this research reveals an explicit sense of vocation from practitioners that has not yet been highlighted in the connected research and literature of youth ministry.

The findings of this research connect with investigations across other professions too. Cunningham (2017), for example, highlights how GPs are personally invested in their work and Knafo and Sagiv's work underlines "the importance of values in vocational behaviour" (Knafo & Sagiv, 2004, p. 255). This is also seen in the work of Moyo, Goodyear-Smith, Weller, Robb, and Shulruf (2016). Thus reinforcing the importance of the discoveries of this research regarding values, alongside underlining the fresh insights as to youth ministry and its underpinning values.

The final aspect to consider with regard to personal vocation is the specific expression of work these practitioners felt called to and in particular the emphasis on ministry is of notable interest. As these practitioners talked about what they do, ministry was an important descriptor and an essential means of underlining the particular focus of their practice:

I am very uncomfortable in Christian circles of using the term youth worker. I think because it is too closely tied to what we see in the world of secular youth work not that there is anything wrong with that, it is just that distinctive, that what we are doing, has a different purpose and different agenda (Craig).

As Rick said, "youth ministry pushes us to remember why we are doing what we are doing" or as Mark shared, "it keeps you focused on what it is about." As Pete W. noted, "we can have this Christian emphasis and bent which if you are in a youth work setting you can't."

Ministry was seen to connect with the purposes of the Christian church at large and prevent youth engagement from being isolated but also recognise its specific focus, in the sense of the age-focused expression of what the church is about. (Though as Craig recognised this “requires a broader theological understanding of the church.”) More specifically, ministry was seen as a term that allows for a focus on the spiritual engagement with a young person, rather than on programmes or activities, emphasising the spiritual and pastoral response or maybe more accurately a pastoral journeying with:

[Y]outh work reminds you that it requires work and it’s hard work at times, but the ministry is the kind of softer, the journeying alongside, pastoring, guiding and almost that kind of championing, cheering them on, going, you can do this, you've got potential you've got everything in your hand that you need and just praying for them. I think so often we get caught up on the work bit that we forget actually I have a responsibility and a pretty unique position here to just pray for them and it doesn't all revolve around them, which is good (Mark).

This ministering that is core to youth ministry is not simply a lived-out expression of their faith but an active drawing young people towards God, that Colleen describes as facilitating: “[H]onestly I think I’m just a facilitator, . . . so the amount of time I just go back and right Lord what do you want to do.” This connects with Hall’s definition of youth ministry “in which faith is not just a motivating factor, but the explicit purpose and message of the work “(cited in Clyne, 2015, p. 24).

Ministering was seen as an active word, action flowing from knowing and loving God, alongside action to those around you, regardless of setting. As both Rick and Mark explain:

I think true ministry is whenever, those ministering, or listening to God

and knowing God with their minds . . . loving God and displaying that love for God and also the people around them but they are also acting on that . . . I suppose that could be in a gathered sense or in a wider sense throughout the week. So, I think I minister to people when I listen to them, I minister to young people whenever I am asking questions, I can minister to young people when I put on an event or create a space for them to come into and also minister to young people when I open up the Bible and teach them, it's wide I think (Rick).

[B]reaking it down, you are ministering to someone, you are meeting a need, you are serving . . . It keeps you focused on what it is about . . . there are lots of things you can get involved with and get carried away with, in many ways with but ministry draws you back to, this is about Jesus and ministering with and to others (Mark).

Furthermore, ministry specifically recognises the *with* aspect of this work and the divine nature of this 'with'. It's the distinctive that moves the praxis of this community from youth work to youth ministry:

[Y]outh ministry is reaching out to young people where they are in their specific context seeking to understand their context and carrying Christ into that world. Intentionally bring Christ into that world. For me that's introducing them to Christ, praying that they will have an authentic meeting with Christ, a conversion experience would be my tradition of that, so they will come to faith and be converted but for me that's really quite early on in the journey it's the formation that comes after that so youth ministry is not just evangelistic it's everything that comes after fully forming young people in the image of Christ with the intention primarily of doing that within in the context of the local church (Craig).

Root (2006, 2007a, 2012; Root & Dean, 2011) also explores the nature of this 'with God' aspect of youth ministry in regard to place sharing and also as a theological

task. He argues that for youth ministry this is about joining with God, joining with young people, together participating in God's presence, God's mission. Thus, when youth ministry acts in this manner it provides an antidote to Lyall's fear that "ministers... become so infatuated with a secular model of practice that they neglect their primary commitments and eventually find themselves divorced from them" (2001, p. 180). This focus on ministry, evident from these practitioners, underlines the integral nature of their faith, not just as a motivating value but also a directional factor as it impacts the nature of their practice. Thus, this research is uncovering the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland to have a clear identity and faith framework and revealing the personal nature of this faith expression, as it is lived out from the perspective of each practitioners' own walk with God. This illustrates an integrity present from these practitioners as their "participation in this story . . . keeps alive the vision and the motivation for ministry" (Lyall, 2001, p. 181).

As Beaudon states "[w]hat we share with our students, uncomfortably, is the complicated and obscure travail of intimacy with God" (cited in Roebben, 2012, p. 204). Craig emphasises this further, this listening to, this joining with God:

I have become much more . . . driven in my ministry to . . . finding out what God is doing and joining in. I used to think that was nonsense and now I realise that is absolutely, I wish I hadn't been so arrogant when I was younger but that idea of 'Lord what are you doing in the life of this community' which breaks down to 'what are you doing in the lives of these individual young people' and what's the best practice here and now in this moment in time. So, one of the things I am convinced is vital and I am passionate about is getting anyone in ministry but especially as I work with young people is just think reflectively about ministry to be prayerful in ministry, to seek the voice of God but to do hard, hard work in thinking through and listening doing community evaluations (Craig).

In summary, as practitioners share their deep-seated passion for their work, their integration of faith and their commitment to young people and their ministry is

noteworthy. These practitioners are motivated and fuelled with regard to their actions. The compassion and care for these young people dominated the interviews, uncovering a youth ministry in Northern Ireland that is significantly influenced by the faith of these practitioners. In addition, this motif of personal engagement came through particularly when recalling biblical metaphors for their ministry, which introduces the second common value, a strong regard for the Bible.

Strong regard for the Bible

If the previous section illustrates the significance of personal narratives as windows to appreciating values and beliefs, this section illustrates how the Bible is a significant lens through which practitioners view their practice and through which we can view their practice. It is also worth noting the length of time practitioners would take to share significant passages or stories from the Bible, directly quoting from the Bible or recounting the stories in their own words. Furthermore, as these practitioners shared, their references or use of the Bible wasn't limited in response to one or two questions but evident throughout the interviews. For example, Phil would often quote verses or passages to back up his thinking and practice.

Though their reflections were very personal, the responses revealed the collective foundational impact of the Bible on their practice, serving commonly to direct and motivate their lives and praxis. Stories or passages were cited to describe how and why these individual practitioners are engaging with young people, linking with the previous section on personal vocation and evidencing an interesting link across these two common values. For example, Martin described two passages that continue to influence who he is and how he operated:

You know when I first thought about doing youth work there were two passages that stood out to me . . . one was . . . when Jesus was asking Peter does he love him and . . . the other one was the Matthew 25 . . . those two passage for me are personal you know they are sort of more about me in

some ways than about young people . . . so for me, it's a revelation for me those passage are more about me . . . but yes those are the ones that keep me on track (Martin).

This is illustrative of a repeating pattern of a personal engagement with a passage or story, that in turn has shaped how these practitioners operate. As we can see from the impact of the mentoring example of Paul on Timothy for Craig's ministry or Pete T.'s intentional focus of engaging with the Holy Spirit:

[I]n terms of ministry I read Paul's writings to Timothy very often . . . because that is where I am, it's the older Christian about to leave this world and intentionally almost commissioning his young protégé to take on and carry the faith and . . . so I continually come back to that in terms of ministry practice (Craig).

[T]he one I use all the time with staff and has stuck with me for fifteen years is 'we only want to do what we see the Father doing'²⁸ and that's it, you can [have] all these incredible youth work, youth ministry ideas and how to work with them we always go with that, what's God doing at the moment and where is the Holy Spirit moving and we just want to join you God where it is (Pete T.).

These three examples from Martin, Pete T. and Craig are interesting as well due to the ongoing nature of their impact. These practitioners return repeatedly to the words and message of these passages thus creating a foundational directional impact on youth ministry. We can see this again as Pete W. shares how through wrestling with the message of Luke chapter 10 and Matthew chapter 10, he finds a directional purpose for youth ministry:

²⁸ John 5:19

I sometimes felt in youth ministry that, I didn't know what our purpose was, but the purpose of gathering young people is not just to entertain them but it's to grow them in Christ and then to challenge them in to life and show their faith to other people (Pete W.).

It is this link between thinking and practice and the reflexivity in place that is of interest. For these practitioners, the Bible was a strong catalyst as their youth ministry practice is heavily infiltrated by both biblical thought and deep reflection. Though, as Root argues, "youth ministry does not simply apply Bible verses or theological points of old to research on adolescent behavior or ministerial practices. Rather, youth ministry is in the business of constructing theology itself" (Root, 2007b, p. 33) and the findings of the research illustrate practice is revealing theology. As Graham advocates, "Christian practice is not just the acting out of predetermined moral norms, or the application of doctrinal truths . . . practices might be imagined as the bearers of living principles of hope and obligation" (2002, p. 111). This raises interesting questions around the nature of this high regard for the Bible.

I think to limit this engagement to the application of biblical passages oversimplifies the process of engagement. Helen Cameron's (2013) four voices of theology – normative theology, formal theology, espoused theology and operant theology – provide a helpful structure to consider the words and associated practices of these practitioners. Though Scripture is connected to normative theology, we can see its imprint on both the espoused theology and operant theology of these practitioners and, in particular, shared espoused theology. For example, Rick and Laura H. spoke of the Bible's impact on practice but more than that, they gave language for common themes around a desire for flourishing in the lives of young people and the collaborative nature of this ministry. For instance, Rick cited that the account of Samuel and Eli "speaks to me about the equipping nature of youth ministry that at times I'm just there to equip someone else to go on and flourish and do amazing things" and connects with the idea of "placing young people in an environment where they will hear God speak and also at times it might

be creating that environment for young people to hear God speak” (Rick). Whereas Laura H., reflecting on the body of Christ shares, “Youth ministry not just being this separate thing or something that is handed over to the youth worker and a few youth leaders but actually something that we are all supposed to be nurturing each other, encouraging each other.”

These practitioners are not just articulating values but exhibiting an ability to reflect on and to recognise the outcomes of their orientation. Rick expressed his desire “to have youth ministry that is centred on biblical imagery and framework” and Phil spoke of a biblical framework:

I think part of my heart would be that they would, that young people would have a biblical framework . . . how do you help them, how do you equip them, how do you give them the tools to how to even stand up for their faith, ahem and how do they speak about Jesus in a way that is loving, is caring, is biblical, is the whole counsel of God, knowing how to say the right things . . . there is a relationship that needs to be built up and isn't not in a vacuum, theology is not in a vacuum, none of it's in a vacuum so how do you equip the guys to do that . . . biblical literacy, depth, being able to articulate your faith, but actually being able to ask good questions because you have a biblical framework (Phil).

I am aware that these practitioners are coming from recognised evangelical contexts, however, that does not automatically translate into the kind of practice evident in this research and the findings of this research are interesting on several accounts. First, it opposes the accusations that youth ministry practice has a lack of biblical foundations or theological articulation (Aziz et al., 2017). Second, it reflects an evangelical flavour, that though not necessarily surprising, confuses accusations of declining Bible engagement and attends to the contemporary perspective that is advocated through Perrin's (2015) work. Therefore, the finding of youth ministry practitioners with a practice heavily infiltrated with biblical engagement and reflection is noteworthy.

It is not a surprise that practitioners from within the Protestant evangelical sector would have a high regard for the Bible. This is echoed across the work of Bielo (2009), Crapanzano (2000), and Stevenson (2013), in their research in America, or through the work of Guest (2007), Perrin (2015), or Strhan (2012), within the United Kingdom. However, the purpose and the settings of those inquiries are distinct from the youth ministry project of this thesis. For example, Bielo's work (2009) investigates an activity, Bible study, but this research into youth ministry does not focus on the handling of the Bible or even the existence of biblical literacy but rather investigates the nature of youth ministry and from that perspective reveals the underpinning influence of the Bible on youth ministry practice. Furthermore, as Perrin notes, "[m]uch has been written about evangelical attitudes towards the Bible. However, there is relatively little nuanced data about how British evangelicals negotiate Scriptural authority" (2015, p. 220). Thus, this research among youth ministry practitioners adds to scholarship with regards to a better understanding of evangelicals but also within the lesser researched context of Northern Ireland.

It is important to also highlight the evidence of declining Bible engagement (Bible Society, 2014; Copley, 2005; Field, 2014; Leach, 2016). Field's research noted "declining allegiance to the Bible visible on various fronts, even among regular churchgoers. In an everyday sense, one interpretation could be that Christianity is becoming de-coupled from the holy book on which it is founded" (2014, p. 503). I have to admit this is what I would have expected as an outcome of the research. Years in practice, working alongside young people and within youth ministry, I have noticed this decline in Bible engagement and biblical literacy and was not expecting this dominance of a practice deeply impacted by a strong regard for the Bible. In fact alongside an increasing secularism (Doebler & Shuttleworth, 2018; Voas, 2009) it would be somewhat naïve to presume those within the evangelical church are immune to this decreasing engagement. This is exemplified through the research of Kennedy (2014), whose study reacts to the growing decline in biblical literacy across emerging generations.

The expected lack of biblical engagement and youth ministry's need for theological engagement has been much documented. Canales (2006); Clark (2008b); Dean (2013); Livermore (2002); Root (2007b, 2012); Root and Dean (2011) are among the voices advocating for stronger theological engagement, as I referenced in the opening chapter of this thesis. Dean states that the result is that youth ministry has been driven by the social sciences rather than theologically, leaving its theological footing shaky and therefore failing to engage young people in serious theological reflection (Dean, 2000, 2010b). This argument is also reflected in Ward's critique of urban mission in the United Kingdom (2013). Brain also claims it is "rare to find examples of reflection on the position or locus of interest, arising from youth ministry practitioners" (2013, p. 8). Yet that is not what I find here. These practitioners engaged readily in reflection and showed evidence of reflexivity. Nor am I seeing evidence of "a pattern of work that belies a deep spirituality" (Brain, 2013, p. 6).

In chapter one, I cited the arguments expounding evidence for a lack of biblical or theological foundations for youth ministry. Hielema argues that a lack of theological engagement has stunted the growth in youth ministry, as we haven't helped young people articulate their faith: "The biblical illiteracy and theological shallowness of many Christian adolescents is a reality . . . we have passed on insufficiently examined theologies that simply are incapable of evoking a deep hunger" (Hielema, 2010, p. 185). Likewise, Livermore states, "Postmodern students are longing for something more and their leaders need to be empowered to give them more" (2002, p. 92). However, this critique or a lack of depth is not what this research reveals. The high regard for the Bible, evident across the research, exposes not just a personally held value but also a motivational value and one which also created a direction and a framework for practice.

Consequently, though literature and research of youth ministry has been critical of a lack of biblical, theological, reflective engagement of those engaging in youth ministry, the findings of this research refutes all three of these accusations. This

adds a fresh voice to the wider conversation on the nature of youth ministry alongside exposing distinctives worthy of note in the Northern Irish context.

Thus it is interesting to see youth ministry practice in Northern Ireland, organic in its expression of a theological and ministerial praxis as the influence of the Bible unfolds. The use of the term organic is to express the consequential nature of this impact. These practitioners' primary aim wasn't to be theological *per se* but rather this flowed from their core values. The interaction of a personal sense of vocation and a high regard of the Bible resulted in praxis that was reflective and theological, a lived theology.

Evangelicalism is noted for its biblicism, (Scalise, 2011, p. 578) and as Noll acknowledges evangelicalism is "an activist movement" (Noll, 2004; Scalise, 2011, p.584). Consequently I believe what we are witnessing here is this blend of biblicism and activism, as the overflow of biblical engagement is very much towards action, into practice. Also Root acknowledges,

[u]nlike some other forms of practical theology, evangelical practical theology must contend with the identity marker of the centrality of the Bible. The social sciences and forms of philosophy must be used to support and not stand against the commitment to the Bible" (Root, 2014b, p. 107).

Therefore, as this research reveals what is expressed in this context and practised by these practitioners, it is evidence of the Bible not just directing practice but serving as a paradigm for practice. As Clark notes,

[t]he way to maintain the integrity of a practical theology model or method is to ensure that the Bible is the final definitive and authoritative source of truth, and all other data sets help to contextualize, understand, and align that truth in the service of God's kingdom. This correlative relationship between the Scriptures and the context is an intuitive process for most seasoned youth workers (Clark, 2008b, p. 17).

As indeed the text of this research showed, practitioners moved with ease from biblical principles or stories to practice, a lived theology. Admittedly many were reluctant to describe themselves as theologians, though I cannot help but think their practice would very much suggest they are. As Laura H. honestly reflects “first and foremost who I am you know and I suppose I pour a lot of who I am into my role . . . comes from my theology, faith you know all those things are wrapped up”. This comment sums up well the reflections and actions from across these practitioners as their ministry flows from their enacted faith. It is the influence of their faith, the Bible, the connection across the values and their cumulating significance on practice that shapes the how and why of these practitioners’ ministry.

Cumulative significance of these values on practice

Through uncovering and exploring these dominant values it is apparent that the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland is inspired by faith, and informed by Scripture. However, these values are more than motivational, as the integrity with which they are embedded into practice revealed their influence in creating a paradigm for practice. This underlines the link from values to practice, and signposts the connection from the characteristics of youth ministry to the nature of youth ministry which I will explore more in the next chapter.

These values reveal an epistemological viewpoint that embraces a Christian worldview but in particular an integrative faith held and lived in practice. As shown, the words and stories of these practitioners do not separate beliefs and action but rather are illustrative of an integrative praxis that is committed to young people. This impact has already been recognised throughout this chapter. Furthermore, the outworking of the two values, vocational call and Bible is seen as practitioners articulated their ministry purpose and message and further illustrating how the Bible is providing a paradigm for practice.

As practitioners articulated the 'why' of their practice, there was no lack of agreement on the purpose of their work or ministry. Practitioners spoke easily of their desire to lead, to bring, to introduce young people to Jesus. As Pete W. stated "the purpose of youth ministry is the bringing of young people to life in Jesus". Or as Craig shared, "[i]ntroducing them to Christ, praying that they will have an authentic meeting with Christ" (Craig). "To lead people towards Jesus . . . to help them discover who they are in and who they have been created to be, who God has created them to be" (Rick). This ministry is very much engaging with God, as the practitioners play an active role in engaging young people with God or creating environments for this connection and is reflective of their own personally held beliefs.

Colleen and Grant spoke of helping young people encounter God. Colleen shared how "this year we have seen two hundred and forty-one teenagers begin a relationship with Jesus which for me is the goal every time" and Grant referred to "nine kids that got saved." Though the stories did not stop there, they spoke of a growing faith, a lived-out faith, revealing a focus on knowing Jesus; it was not just about an introduction or an encounter but a continued process or journey. Colleen acknowledged her part in "introducing them to God for the first time, or helping them go on that journey." Mark says "leading people into a growing relationship with Jesus. That's not just a one-time decision, it's not a tick-box exercise, it's a relationship, a journey." The long-term nature of this transforming relationship with God was emphasised again and again.

Colleen illustrated this further through the story of how one teenager, over a period of time, moved from "notorious" to "being involved". Colleen patiently described a process of change, from building trust to getting "right with Jesus" and then continues to describe further change as this teenager wanted to get involved in serving on the youth team and is getting on much better in school; "just seeing transformation as a whole, that's the kingdom" (Colleen).

Traditionally, this process has come under ecclesiological labels such as evangelism or discipleship and though these terms were acknowledged in the interviews, they did not dominate. Rather the process was described as relationship with Jesus and marked by transformation. As Craig shares, “youth ministry is not just evangelistic, it’s everything that comes after fully forming young people in the image of Christ” or as Nicole emphasises:

I really want them to be so deeply rooted in God that no matter what comes their way, it's not gonna, it's not gonna shake them, it's not gonna to pull them away, it's not gonna destroy them, it's not gonna disillusion, do ya know, they're gonna be able to, they're gonna be able to wrestle with the things they need to wrestle with cos that's healthy but they're not gonna be uprooted (Nicole).

The ongoing nature of this living is captured by Wijnsma:

‘In Christ’ the individual believer becomes part of this great transformation. Sanctification comes naturally from stepping into this movement, from ‘being in Christ’, with a much lesser risk of turning again into moralism. Redemption, as the way out, is also a course in life one is placed in by ‘being in Christ’ (Wijnsma, 2011, p. 230).

Furthermore, as I asked the participants to share their success stories or highlights of ministry, their reflections underlined this aim, as they shared stories of young people encountering Jesus, growing in their faith and faith being passed on: “[W]e recognise that too they have grown and become really beautiful young people who really love God” (Laura E). “[T]o see young people, stand up and going for this is just unbeatable, it’s pretty special” (Mark).

I have noticed a real step up in faith of those ones going through baptism and just that ownership and decided actually I am a follower of Jesus and I am going to go for this here, which was brilliant (Mark).

Practitioners described a faith which is not just owned but shared, as Craig noted, “I think the greatest joy in that is not just seeing him rise up in ministry but seeing him now beginning to disciple young people.” This point is echoed but also sobered by McQuillan’s comments:

I have also suggested that those who work with youth must measure their success today by means other than numbers evangelized or even by how strongly the message of Jesus is presented. It should be measured by the depth of spirituality and the extent of openness of the minister who searches together with young people for new expressions of spirituality that will transform the world (McQuillan, 2009, p. 87).

For these practitioners, the dominant goal of their time and effort is to be part of seeing a transformational change in the lives of the young people around them – a transformational change centred around a meeting and engagement with God, a message of redemption alongside the practice of redemption. It is this practice of redemption, the ministry aspect of this activity that connects the message with the performance. This is a theme I will focus on in the next chapter, for as this chapter has uncovered the values and the foundations of youth ministry, the next chapter seeks to uncover the performance of youth ministry through its practices.

This personal and deeply held sense of vocation has led to a compassion and commitment to young people, which when twinned with a deep regard for Scripture creates a robust framework within which to practice. As Dean (2004b) states, we require more self-conscious theological awareness in youth ministry, not less. For these practitioners, their practice is passionate, self-conscious and theologically aware. Their compassion and care for these young people dominated the interviews, evidenced in the ability to reflect with discernment and act with wisdom. This uncovered a youth ministry that is inspired by faith, informed by Scripture and which works itself out in the commitment to young people.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have uncovered and explored two dominant values, a personal sense of vocation and a strong regard for the Bible. I've considered how they influence these practitioners and their practice and then confirmed both values as core and motivating characteristics in the distinctive nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. This investigation revealed the underlining significance of the practitioners themselves as to the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland and also the importance of taking time to listen to their ideas, reflections and stories. It has successfully connected with the methodology of this research piece and the richness in exploring an often unheard voice in that of the practitioner themselves.

This research brings fresh revelation as to what practitioners value. The existence of these values illustrates a cohesion to youth ministry that was thought to be missing and contradicts previous research accusing youth ministry of being biblically and theologically light. This uncovering and honouring is opening up a richness to youth ministry in Northern Ireland that the reflections of Philips (2018) would suggest are not typical of the rest of the United Kingdom. Philips' work advocates for a posture in ministry that is already evident in the Northern Irish expressions of youth ministry, seen through the committed and passionate practitioner that deeply values the young people they interact with, alongside a theologically integrative approach to ministry.

It is important to remember the lack of research on youth ministry in Northern Ireland and thus each well-evidenced discovery is significant. However, it is also pertinent to the findings of this chapter that no one has explicitly researched values held by youth ministry practitioners and so this, too, brings new learning and new discoveries to the conversation of youth ministry at large. This opens a rich perspective as to how the personal impacts practice and the subsequent creation of praxis. Therefore, as this research showcases the Northern Irish expression, it is

apparent that the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland is inspired by their faith and informed by Scripture. With this foundational aspect in place, I will next explore the overflow of these characteristics to the overall nature of youth ministry, the theme of the next chapter.

Chapter Four: The redemptive practices of transformation seen in the interplay of context and ministry

"[I]t's trying to redeem those opportunities" (Phil).

Introduction

So far, I have shown that the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland is inspired by the faith of the practitioners and informed by Scripture. I have established the impact of faith on the vocational choices of these practitioners, revealing a very personal call to young people and to youth ministry. This sits alongside a practice that is informed by Scripture, with faith and Scripture working together to create a paradigm for practice that is committed to young people. In this chapter, I wish to explore the further impact of these core characteristics on youth ministry regarding the transforming aspect to this ministry that is evidenced through redemptive practices. This can be seen explicitly in the interplay across context and ministry, and in the dynamic nature of youth practitioners as agents of change. Therefore, in this chapter, I will explore context, the redemptive nature of this ministry and showcase the significant influence of the practitioners throughout. Any context is pertinent to ministry and practice, though as the Northern Ireland context carries an additional complexity due to the political and religious division, significant space will be given across this chapter to explore the impact of this context for youth ministry in Northern Ireland.

The significance of context

The significance of context is not a new argument within practical theology, seen in the work of Osmer (2008), Graham (2017; 2002, 2013; 2017), Cameron (2010; 2013) and more specifically Arzola (2006), Baker and Reader (2009), Espinoza (2017) Holland et al. (2007), Robb and Open University. (2007) and Widstrom (2003). However, understanding the specifics of the Northern Irish context is crucial to this research. An appreciation of this setting is fundamentally important to enable an awareness of its impact on the lives of practitioners and their practice and thus more accurately understand the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. From the beginning of this project, as outlined in chapter one, I have wanted to consider the influential factors linked to context, engaging in a discourse regarding the influence of place on ministry and also ministry influence on place. This underlines the importance of appreciating youth ministry within its situated context and “to foreground the significance of the human context and the realities of lived experience as the domain in which Christian ministry or action takes place” (Graham, 2017, p. 3). As Clark proposes,

[t]he contextual interplay between the life experiences, struggles, and faith of people in any context will shape how they view God, the world, life and faith. A practical theology process that shapes youth ministry praxis, then, must be committed to a thorough and disciplined understanding of the context of any issue or situation we interpret (Clark, 2008, p. 19).

Fulkerson also wrestles with the desire to do theological justice to the community she is studying, and so the need to pay attention comes to the fore, advocating for the importance of framing a situation: “The framing of contemporary situation involves the question not only of ‘what to do’, but equally what constitutes the relevant ‘items, powers, and events’ and how to understand a contemporary environment as that which demands a response”(Fulkerson, 2007, p. 9). It is the later aspect of this framing, appreciating the setting, that is of particular interest to

this research inquiry. This framing acknowledges the “complexity of place” (Fulkerson, 2007, p. 254) and involves a rich description, involving the wider spheres of culture and “complex political and social constituents of human life” (Fulkerson, 2007, p. 11). This connects with the practical theology framework as “a particular way of attending to the structure of situation; it is an inquiry shaped by a logic of transformation” (Fulkerson, 2007, p. 22). I do not intend to fully copy Fulkerson’s process but rather employ this concept as a means to open up meaning and understanding, not only regarding the influence of context on youth ministry but also to more accurately interpret the current nuanced nature of the Northern Irish context post conflict. This will portray a thick description of the cultural and social patterns dominating the Northern Irish context.

Consequently, in this chapter I will acknowledge the influence of context through taking time to share participants’ comments and insights on the context. This enables an inquiry “into these embodied expressions of situated knowledge” (Graham, 2017, p. 4) or as Bass coins this, “embodied, situated knowing-in-action” (Bass, 2016, p. 2). This will be considered in conjunction with testing claims by authors such as Widstrom and Senter (Widstrom, 2003, p. 71) who hold that all youth ministry is local and emphasise the importance of building contextually appropriate youth ministries. I will explore the significance of this particular context for those in youth ministry operating in Northern Ireland.

I also need to acknowledge that an investigation pertaining to context opens up multiple areas of investigation to which this thesis could not do justice. Therefore, I turn to the data to identify the most important aspects of context that impact youth ministry practice in Northern Ireland. Consequently, in this chapter, I focus on the two dominant contextual influences as highlighted by the practitioners – church culture and social identities. I will consider the impact of church culture as a significantly embedded social institution in the contextual framework of life in Northern Ireland. I will then explore social identities, as influenced by the backdrop of recent civil conflict, acknowledging the continued impact of the post-conflict era, on the political and religious positions but hopefully with a currently nuanced

perspective. In addition, I will consider the impact this has had — and continues to have — on youth ministry practice in Northern Ireland.

Espinoza writes, “practical theology invites congregational and ministry leaders to place into conversation the Bible, theology, and current contexts with an eye toward implementing good practices” (Espinoza, 2017, p. 392). Therefore, holding to my intervention, both in terms of a hermeneutical phenomenological approach and operating within practical theology, I will seek to keep attending (Osmer, 2008) to the voices of these practitioners, and take time for both “descriptive and interpretive perceptions of lived experience” (Robinson, 2015, p. 158). However, more than that, in “following Browning's thought, practical theology entails looking underneath the ministry practices of the church to ascertain the theories behind them” (Espinoza, 2017, p. 393). Thus, I will widen the engagement to the social science, as I consider these theories.

Consequently, I am not seeking to simply describe the context for youth ministry in Northern Ireland but rather through framing the situation to recognise the interplay that exists across context and ministry. As such, I will consider what impact this place has on practice and subsequently on the nature of youth ministry. Therefore, I will seek to integrate throughout this exploration of context, a recognition as to what type of youth ministry is surfacing.

In chapter three, the practitioners’ values revealed important foundations for youth ministry. Now in this chapter, it is the context-ministry interplay that reveals both a particular quality of youth ministry, a redeeming quality and further emphasises the role practitioners play as agents of change. I want to uncover the transformational impact of youth ministry through taking time to understand the contextual influences and how youth ministry practitioners engage. It is the revelation of performance that is the focus of this chapter, uncovering what faithful performance (Swinton & Mowat, 2006) reveals about the nature of youth ministry.

As mentioned, the motifs of uncovering and honouring are crucial to this research and, as I explore context, I again found the need to appreciate what practitioners shared and to take the time to honour their reflections. Without this posture and practice, it would be easy to fall into stereotypes of a Northern Ireland context rather than to deeply listen to what is actually happening. The nuanced perspective is important in both considering and sharing the findings of this research.

Northern Ireland has featured much in the limelight and resulting media focus, during the civil conflict and post-conflict period of the last fifty years. As such, I want to acknowledge one pertinent question lurking beneath this research – is there life beyond the Troubles? As Brewer writes, “[t]here has been too much focus on ‘the Troubles’ . . . the almost exclusive attention on civil unrest has made sociologists blind to other features of social formation” (2001, p. 779). I wonder if the same could be said of theologians? Hence, in connecting with the comments from Mitchell and Ganiel (2011, pp. 40-41) regarding disclosing biases, it is important for me to acknowledge that one of my hopes for this research is that I might have an opportunity to paint a picture of life in Northern Ireland, particularly the life of young people, that is not predominately dominated by conflict. For too long Northern Ireland has lived under the shame and stereotyping of this conflict and now twenty years on from the Good Friday Agreement, surely there is more to life in Northern Ireland.²⁹

The reality of this inquiry as a researching practitioner has exposed both sadness and hope for me. There is sadness as this research shows that the influence of the past is still deeply embedded in life in Northern Ireland and young people continue to live under the shadow of previous conflict. (I will explore this in more detail in

²⁹ “Good Friday Agreement. Settlement reached by all the major Northern Ireland parties, including Sinn Fein and excepting DUP, in 1998. Reinforced the right of Northern Ireland to remain in the union with Britain until voted otherwise in a referendum. Set up institutional linkages between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between all parts of the British Isles. Also set police and equality reform in motion. Positively received by most nationalists at the time, while unionists were, and remain, bitterly divided. Also known as the Belfast Agreement” (Mitchell, 2006, p. 146).

this chapter.) However, the emerging stance of youth ministry, as expressed by the practitioners, is one of hope, seeking to redeem the opportunities presented.

One could accuse these practitioners of being too rosy in their outlook, but this optimism does not seem to be operating in naïve isolation. There is a recognition that living in Northern Ireland could create a “bubble effect of being that bit smaller” (Mark), yet, again and again these practitioners articulated a thought-through position, not a culturally insular one:

I think it's just 'cause of the history and culture which we have, so we do have a . . . for want of a better word a religious background, that we come from and a heritage there and I think it's trying to use that in the best possible light with the opportunities that we are provided with . . . it's almost seen as it's expected here and so it's trying to redeem those opportunities while they are here and make the most of them (Phil).

These words from Phil illustrate the interplay of context and ministry and note the significant motif of this chapter, redemption. As Phil acknowledges, this complex religious culture, intermixed with history and politics, actually creates openings for youth ministry to engage with young people, alongside opportunities to respond to the issues that arise from context. There are opportunities which Phil believes youth ministry can redeem, in the sense that youth ministry doesn't just engage with young people but rather turns this around for the overwhelming good of each young person. This is illustrated as these practitioners repeatedly evidenced reflective practice, that has no fear of considering what might be best for their young people. “[I]t's just 'cause we love young people and want them to be the best they can be. And the spiritual journey is part of that journey too” (Pete T.).

At this stage I would like to further explore this idea of redemption. I will explain why redemption better describes the transformation process evident across youth ministry and introduce the idea of redemption practices of transformation. I will articulate redemption as liberating activity of God, evident in the youth ministry

practice through their engagement with God, their advocacy for young people and the ongoing process of transformation, in the lives of young people.

Redemption

Throughout the interviews, practitioners would often speak of transformation, to describe both what they do, their practice and what they want to be about, their values. This emphasis on transformation has already been highlighted in chapter three, reflected in the very personal impact of faith on the lives and vocational choices of these practitioners but also in the stories they tell that focus on the changed lives of young people. As I have stated, for these practitioners the dominant goal of their time and effort is to be part of seeing change in the lives of young people. Thus, holding to my guiding motifs of uncovering and honouring to aid the accurate understanding of youth ministry in Northern Ireland, I argue that transformation does not accurately capture the praxis exhibited. However, it is this idea of redemption, which came directly from the practitioners' words and stories, that more accurately and cohesively reflects youth ministry practice. Redemption does not deny the process of transformation but rather places it in a context of purpose and practice, encapsulating the nature of this ministry. Therefore I purport, that when transformation is being referred to in this thesis, the redemption narrative is also in operation. Moreover, the very activity of youth ministry is engaging in the acts of redemption, what I refer to as redemptive practices of transformation.

It is this contemporary practice of redemption that connects with the Christian faith story that I wish to focus on in this chapter. However, before I explore the practices of redemption, I will first summarise redemption through the lens of the Christian faith and introduce its presence across youth ministry.

Redemption is not a new concept and has been explored both within the Christian faith and outside. However, it is the Christian roots that are of interest and the work

of Colijn (2010); Jones (2014); Morris (1983); O'Collins (2007); Ruether (1998); Stott (1989) and Swinton (2007) have been helpful in articulating redemption as an ancient practice, with Christian doctrine and practice evident in the contemporary world.

Ruether (1998) helpfully charts out redemption in the Hebrew Scriptures and early Judaism, noting the historic origins regarding the releasing from slavery into liberation. Redemption means liberation through the action of one for another; it involves a financial transaction, an advocacy, by means of financial gains. (I will return to the idea of redemption as advocacy later in this section.)

In Hebrew Scripture redemption originally had a very concrete social meaning. It referred to the ransoming of a slave from bondage. In a world where slave labour was assumed and persons became enslaved in a variety of ways, from kidnapping and capture in war to being sold by their families or even selling themselves to pay debts, ransoming from slavery generally meant a monetary transaction. Money was paid by an advocate, even by the slave him or herself, to the slave-owner to buy the slave's freedom.

But this common social transaction was translated into collective and religious meanings in the course of Israel's history. It came to refer to national redemption from slavery in Egypt effected by divine intervention. God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage became the paradigmatic story of redemption of the people as a whole (Ruether, 1998, p. 15).

Transformation, which remains the both the process and outcome of redemption, is now God's work. Redemption is not limited to advocacy through money but through the participation of God. As McGrath (2011) explains, redemption involves the activity of God, but also reveals the character and purposes of God. It is also worth noting that redemption extends beyond the advocacy of one slave to the deliverance of nation:

The Bible narrates a series of stories which disclose the nature and character of God, and the shape of the redemption achieved through Christ. The story of the calling of Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the exile in Babylon, and the coming of Jesus Christ are all individual parts of the greater narrative that discloses God's nature and purposes (McGrath, 2011, p. 129).

“The language of ‘redemption’, while having different linguistic roots in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and English . . . overlaps frequently with that of ‘salvation’, and with two less frequently used terms: ‘liberation’ and ‘deliverance’” (O'Collins, 2007, p. 4). It is the active sense of liberation and deliverance that is of interest for this research. Redemption ushers in “reconciliation, adoption, and peace . . . [and] extends beyond human beings to the whole created order”(Jones, 2014, p. 143). It points not just to the activity of God but to the invitation from God to join with Him:

Salvation in the New Testament is a vision of God's work for us and in us, through Christ by the Holy Spirit . . . the New Testament images of salvation tell a single story – the story of God's love for his broken creation, his desire for covenant relationship, and his patient shaping of a people who would reflect his love to one another and to the world . . . God's people are now called to carry on God's redemptive mission (Colijn, 2010, pp. 311-314).

Redemption is the liberating activity of God. It straddles the past, present and future as God transforms our current state, calls us to continue to live in the new freedom He offers and invites us to join with Him in His redemptive mission.

It is the liberating, transforming process of youth ministry that this research reveals. This nature of redemption points to the Christian faith and to Christ himself but also invites “Christians to live in all that freedom means” (Morris, 1983, p. 130).

Transformation does indeed not accurately capture the faith story at play across the lives and ministry of these practitioners. Rather, redemption links to the story of God's intervention and holds to the ongoing activity of God, that, as I highlighted in chapter three, is crucial to ministry. For these practitioners the ‘with God’ aspect of

their work is a crucial marker in their praxis. Redemption acknowledges the role of God that is not necessarily captured in the terminology of transformation.

Redemption is evident across youth ministry, in its embrace of the faith story, the acknowledgement of the activity of God, the need for Christ and the ongoing nature of transformation. Also as this inquiry into understanding the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland is a theological pursuit, redemption connects with the religious and spiritual nature of the task alongside the spiritual nature of youth ministry. Thus, redemption acts as a bridging term with regards to the approach of this research but also in connecting the theological nature of youth ministry in its current situated context. The theological nature of youth ministry is revealed in how these practitioners speak of God, young people and their practice, together revealing a redeeming quality of youth ministry that I will outline in more detail through exploring the practices of redemption.

The redemption evident in this ministry is not just a belief system but it is also an activity. Youth ministry is not just embodying the story of redemption; the integrity of this ministry has already been established but these practitioners are actively involved in this redemptive transformation. This is echoed in the stories of youth ministry, in Pete T.'s story of Chloe, Rick's story of the intern, Craig's reference to the young leader (all referenced in chapter three) alongside their faithfulness to young people overall and, as I will show in this chapter, the engagement within the Northern Irish setting. The actions of these practitioners are resulting in significant impact on the lives of young people.

Moreover, advocacy is a helpful window with regards to youth ministry practice and its performance of redemption. Throughout this thesis we have seen how these practitioners are "championing, cheering" (Mark) young people on. In the previous chapter I have shown a ministry way that is young people-focused, deeply compassionate and highly relational; as such, the redemption evident across youth ministry in Northern Ireland is not representing the financial transactional nature of redemption but rather a highly relational compassionate matter. Advocation

remains, not through financial gains but rather through relationship. As O' Collins recognises, "[t]he supreme advantage in approaching redemption through love is that this view shows how salvation is not primarily a 'process', and even less a 'formula', but a person, or rather three divine persons acting with boundless love" (O'Collins, 2007, p. 182). This is echoed in the words of these practitioners as they describe how they see young people and also as they speak of the impact of their ministry for young people; for example Laura E. says, "when people encountered Jesus they were transformed." Nicole expands as she paints a rich picture of freedom and hope and the role young people themselves play in transforming their communities:

[M]y mission statement for why I do what I do . . . is to preach good news to the poor, bound up the broken-hearted, proclaim freedom for the captives, sow with gladness . . . beauty instead of ashes, that's what my role is to be there but I love that then goes on and says but they will be called oaks of righteousness.³⁰ They will be a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour, they will rebuild the ancient cities. So, it's actually not about us as a church or me as a youth worker going in like . . . a knight in shining armour, do ya know saving this community . . . but actually it's about doing those on the ground, real day-to-day life, doing life stuff with them and bringing Jesus to them and bringing that hope. But actually it's them that are gonna make the biggest impact, it's them that are gonna, that God's gonna raise up, that they're gonna bring healing to their communities, that they're gonna bring revival on their schools, that they're gonna bring hope into their homes (Nicole).

These comments from Nicole illustrate that youth ministry practitioners are aware of the larger cultural and political frameworks at play across Northern Ireland and are seeking to not simply change the spiritual lives of young people but engage with the difficulties of life in contemporary Northern Ireland post-conflict. These

³⁰ Nicole is paraphrasing from Isaiah 61 as she articulates her mission statement.

practitioners are cognisant of the wider societal implications of their actions and as such these practitioners are seeking to usher in redemptive transformation that prioritises the individual but also seeks the good for society at large. Redemption intervenes in the pain and complexity of contemporary life and the lives of not just young people but entire communities. In fact, it is the engagement with context that reveals this rich practice and redemptive motif so clearly, in particular through a distinctive engagement with context and the integral nature of ministry; the active presence of redemption in youth ministry is evident.

Redemption helps unlock a manner of youth ministry in Northern Ireland that carries the transforming story of Christ but also exhibits a particular posture with regard to how it interacts with young people within this context. Though more than simply a posture, the active presence of redemption is seen in the practices of youth ministry. As articulated by Pete W., redemption in words and practices:

[T]he purpose of youth ministry is the bringing of young people to life in Jesus . . . that aspect of in Jesus is a very wide aspect . . . and I think we can bring people to life through encouragement, through giving them things to do and places to be that are safe and good and welcoming environments.
(Pete W.).

Thus, it would be helpful to explain what I mean by redemptive practices of transformation.

Redemptive practices of transformation

It is the performance of practice that is the focus of this chapter and as such the practices of this youth ministry community have been helpful in uncovering the nature of this ministry:

Practices, then, contain values, beliefs, theologies and other assumptions which, for the most part, go unnoticed . . . Importantly, practices are also the bearers of traditions and histories. They are not therefore simply individual actions. Rather they are communal activities that have developed within communities over extended periods of time. Even though they may be manifested in particular instances, Christian practices always relate to particular communities; communities with specific histories and traditions which give meaning, value and direction to the particular forms of practice (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, pp. 20-21).

Fulkerson also opens up understanding of practice, citing Volf and Bass (2002). “Theologians have recently broadened the category ‘Christian practices’ to include the corporately produced and shared practices that address ‘fundamental human needs and conditions’, such as ‘embodiment, temporality, relationship, the use of language, and mortality’”(Fulkerson, 2007, p. 10). This attends “to the variety of activities that make up faith’s situational character as well as ways of reflecting practically on being faithful in a parish”(Fulkerson, 2007, p. 10).

It is this uncovering of what is beneath the surface of activity that is of interest. “Reflection on practices will reveal deep meanings about the nature, purpose and the actions and assumptions of particular individuals or communities, be they religious or otherwise” (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 22). Therefore, I will showcase practices, explaining more of the lived experience of this redemption and how the redeeming practices of transformation expose the distinctives of youth ministry in Northern Ireland, that Northern Irish accent in youth ministry.

Swinton (2007) introduces the idea of gestures of redemption, radical gestures seen in the acts of God and simple gestures in how we treat each other with dignity and value. He argues that these gestures of redemption act as the basis of practical theodicy:

Practical theodicy is the process wherein the church community, in and through its practices, offers subversive modes of resistance to the evil and suffering experienced by the world. The goal of practical theodicy is, by practicing these gestures of redemption, to enable people to continue to love God in the face of evil and suffering and in so doing to prevent tragic suffering from becoming evil (Swinton, 2007, p. 85).

There is an overlap with the emphasis of Swinton and the findings of this research, with regard to the acknowledgement of the Christian faith story and the purpose of youth ministry, that is, Christ focused. However, in honouring these youth ministry practitioners' input, I need to recognise that these practitioners are not seeking to first resist evil and suffering but rather to see the flourishing of the young person. I would agree that "[p]ractices are divinely inspired gestures of cooperation through which human man beings seek to participate faithfully in the redemptive mission of Jesus" (Swinton, 2007, p. 81) and the actions of these practitioners are indeed subversive. However, the practices of redemptive transformation are not limited to specific activities such as the four practices Swinton explores: lament, forgiveness, thoughtfulness, and hospitality. Within this thesis, practice is the performance of values but also, indicative of a posture, a manner that overflows from values into praxis.

Therefore, throughout the remainder of this chapter I will showcase these redemptive practices of transformation. I will illustrate how the engagement in context reveals this rich practice and redemptive motif so clearly. These will be evident as practitioners first embrace the opportunities they have with young people, through their value of and actions towards relationship-building, second in the creation of space for young people to wrestle with the questions and challenges of contemporary living, and third in their ministry manner that is seeking the transforming liberation of young people and their communities.

In conclusion, with the significance of context emphasised, and redemptive nature of youth ministry highlighted, I will now frame the situation. I will aim to show the

significance of context for those in youth ministry operating in Northern Ireland, revealing the redemptive distinctive of youth ministry in Northern Ireland as it interacts with this context. I will consider the ministry that is uncovered, alongside the dynamic nature of youth practitioners as agents of change.

Youth ministry and the Northern Irish context

As I have stated, the interplay across context and ministry reveals both a particular quality of youth ministry, a redeeming quality and the role practitioners play as agents of change, uncovering more about the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. Therefore, in this section I will explore the dominant contextual influences and illustrate throughout how youth ministry engages or responds, twin-tracking the issues of context with the ministry response through examples of redemptive practices of transformation.

All the participants, regardless of location or working setting, articulated a belief that Northern Ireland is a unique or distinct context from rest of the United Kingdom, described by Rick as, “a unique setting” or as stated by Craig, “context makes it different.” Moreover, as youth ministry practitioners shared their experiences about the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland, two areas were repeatedly referenced – church and conflict.

The historical and current influence of church, together with the impact of the conflict on both their ministry and the young people they are working with, were cited as significant markers as to the distinctiveness of the Northern Irish context. It is this aspect – the distinctives as seen through the eyes of the practitioners – that is of interest here. In this section of the chapter I would like to take time to explore both of these, the dominant church culture and the emerging identities and ideologies arising post-conflict. These two areas might not seem new to someone outside of the Northern Ireland context or even someone located within, though

what I hope to uncover is what is understood by these two key influences and their impact on youth ministry today. It is also important to note that these contextual influences are distinct from the rest of the United Kingdom but also further significant due to the ongoing legacy of religion and conflict within the Northern Ireland context, which I will illustrate throughout this section.

There are potentially other aspects pertaining to context that could have been mentioned such as family backgrounds, education, developmental stages, or mental health, all of which have pertinence in the adolescent years. However, the aim of this research is to listen intently to what these practitioners are saying and consider what this tells us and it is these two themes of context that dominated practitioners' reflections. Interestingly Brown says "[w]hat is not explicit is often covertly normative. We ought to be suspicious of a context which is not singled out for attention because it may well have a strongly controlling ideological influence" (Brown in Baker & Reader, 2009, p. 64).

However, before I explore the two main dominant contextual influences and as part of the framing process, it is important to acknowledge the size of Northern Ireland; it has a small population, across a relatively small geographical area, "a wee place" as one practitioner Pete W., articulated:

[R]eason why we are different, is because of the geographical size and populations size [of] Northern Ireland. No matter what side of community, wherever you go, like, we describe Northern Ireland, as a wee place and it is a family and it is home and it's very much a family (Pete W.).

"With a population of 1.8 million people, the region is 13,600 sq. km in size, accounting for six per cent of the total UK land area" (Invest NI, 2017). This is reflected in smaller population clusters compared to the rest of the United Kingdom, ranging from towns such as Lurgan at 34,935 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency NISRA, 2017) to the main city of Belfast at 280,211 (Russell, 2015, p. 7), both represented by the practitioners within this research. This size

creates a mix of repercussions, not simply regarding accessibility but also connection. For example, the short distances between towns and across the country allow for an ease of travel. Also, as the practitioners described this place, phrases used such as “wee place” or “home” or “family” also exposed a deep value around connecting with others and a sense of belonging.

The space and size of Northern Ireland allows for local community connections and for regional connections, both underpinning and giving expression to a value of community. Consequently, size opens up possibilities, connecting people from across different areas in Northern Ireland, as practitioners work and network with young people from various localities across the country and creating potential for rich family and community connection at a local level. It is important to note, though, that due to the potent mix of identities and politics, place also becomes increasingly significant as a means of creating barriers rather than connections. For some young people in Northern Ireland, they are locally focused and travel beyond their local domain is not common, as place becomes loaded with meaning that overshadows any sense of size or distance. This is highlighted in the research of Roulston, Hansson, Cook, and McKenzie, showing that “divisions within a society emerging from 30 years of violence impact on the movement and mobility of young people” (2017, p. 462). This shrinking of connection and limiting belonging to community enclaves is echoed in the work of Leonard (2017), Schubotz and Devine (2008) and Schubotz and Devine (2014).

I will explore this in more detail later in this chapter as I uncover the impact of emerging identities but for now it is important to recognise that though small, the Northern Irish context is home to layers of embedded meaning, creating a more complex background than size might first suggest. Through exploring context, these layers of embedded meaning are exposed and with this comes the opportunity to consider afresh the influence of place on the nature of youth ministry and equally the influence of youth ministry on understanding of place. It also adds to the scholarship regarding the Northern Ireland context through the lens of youth

ministry. Let me begin by exploring the first of the two significant areas regarding context in Northern Ireland – church culture.

The influence of church in Northern Ireland – acknowledging a church culture

The influence of the church and influence of religion across Northern Ireland has been well documented (Bruce, 1986; Doebler & Shuttleworth, 2018; Ganiel, 2006, 2008; Greer, 1985; Hamill, 2010; Jordan, 2001; Mitchell, 2006; Robbins & Francis, 2005). However, as this research into youth ministry connects to a younger generation, with current statistics pertaining to decline in church attendance, it raises the need to consider what we mean by church culture in relation to young people.³¹

Practitioners' comments revealed the recognition of a church culture that exists across Northern Ireland. It is a culture that leads to an engagement with church and church activities for those who attend regularly, as well as those who have a cultural connection with church, as illustrated by the words from Rick below:

[S]till in Northern Ireland there remains a little bit of church culture where young people are at least brought up . . . that sort of church culture that parents whether they are interested or not, they're still willing to send their kids to church (Rick).

There is an acknowledgement that the church is still playing a significant role in the lives of young people, as Martin noted, "churches still have some sense of, feel some sense of responsibility for the community, for doing youth work." Young

³¹ The results of the Brierly Consultancy Church Statistics report show that "UK Church membership has declined from 10.6 million in 1930 to 5.5 million in 2010, or as a percentage of the population; from about 30% to 11.2%. By 2013, this had declined further to 5.4 million (10.3%). If current trends continue, membership will fall to 8.4% of the population by 2025" (FaithSurvey, 2018). International membership is also declining as outlined in the work of Smith, Denton, Faris, and Regnerus (2002) and Ganiel and Winkel (2017).

peoples' participation and opportunities for church connection correlates with the statistics in the Youthnet commissioned research (Youthnet, 2013).³² Youth ministry in Northern Ireland has access to young people that is not as common elsewhere. Yet, as practitioners talked about this participation, it was evident that they were not referring to an owned faith, but rather a culture that is still connected to church. This church culture is often, as Martin comments, linked to a "strong family connection to church" or, as Laura H. reflects,

there is a lot of young adults and some young people and they feel connection to the community but they don't have a faith in Jesus and they, a couple of them, are quite clear about but they feel a connection to the community and because they grew up in it or because their mum or their granny or great-granddad or their families lived in the area for years and there is a history there, you know (Laura H.).

It could be suggested that, of course, youth ministry practitioners would cite church culture as a dominant force, as a ministry setting might automatically emphasise church and church culture. However, connecting with wider research showed that this church culture is not simply about youth ministry but is about the Northern Irish context. For example, the work of Henderson et al, found that in Northern Ireland, "[r]eligion for many is enmeshed with political and ethnic identities and is an expression of community belonging" (Henderson, 2007, p. 116) and "while formalized religious practice is the exception rather than the norm, young people related to the presence or absence of religion in their lives in a way that underlines the links between it and identity, community and politics" (Henderson, 2007, p. 113). Henderson's research acknowledged that, "those in Northern Ireland continued to express the highest levels of religious affirmation, practice and heritage, but there was also evidence of declining ritual practice. One respondent

³² 68% of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were faith/church-based in 2005 and 57.8% of all members of registered youth groups in Northern Ireland were participants in faith/church-based youth groups in 2005 (Youthnet, 2013).

commented ‘everyone comes from religious families but no one follows it’” (Henderson, 2007, p. 117). These findings are affirmed in the more recent work of Brewer and Hayes (2016) and ap Sion (2017), recognising the remaining influence of religion on identity, community and politics.

This also resonated with the emerging data from these practitioners, as they can see how this community orientation can create its own barriers to connection with church, as church can be viewed as traditional, boring or irrelevant:

I think our young people here . . . are dealing with what the stereotype of the church is and Northern Ireland culture and context supposedly how backward we are . . . that plays I think in their opinion. So, if you are trying to do ministry and trying to do it within church context or getting our young people for . . . church, [it’s] like they get Jesus but they don’t get church . . . if we were to tell our young people, like this church does this in the community, that in the community, they would go, that is church, yes, that’s church, that’s the gospel, but all they just see is the boring stuff (Pete T.).

Local doctoral research by Minion (2009) and Thompson (2012) also points towards this decrease in church engagement in Northern Ireland, echoing the European assessment from Voas (2009), Ganiel and Winkel (2017) and Woodhead (2016) regarding declining religious affiliation. Though as Francis et al, acknowledge, Northern Ireland resists “the more radical experience of secularisation experienced in the rest of the United Kingdom” (Francis, Robbins, Barnes, & Lewis, 2006, p. 17). This is echoed in the work of Robbins and Francis (2008) revealing a warmth to religion in young males in Northern Ireland and in Francis et al, studies into attitudes to Christianity, noticing in Northern Ireland “a culture in which the Christian faith continues to occupy such a significant place both in public life and in personal development” (Francis, Robbins, Siôn, Lewis, & Barnes, 2007, p. 158). As Thompson states this “shows the complexity of religious adherence patterns and how the compound socio-political situation in Northern Ireland is inextricably linked to religious expression” (Thompson, 2012, p. 77). The recent research of Doebler

and Shuttleworth also acknowledges that “Northern Ireland is still a society with exceptionally high levels of religious identification” (Doebler & Shuttleworth, 2018, p. 736). However, Doebler and Shuttleworth also note a decreasing trajectory: “Overall religious identification in Northern Ireland appears to be transitioning from being a politically assigned label to being a matter of personal choice . . . this new choice appears to be largely a choice for nonreligion” (Doebler & Shuttleworth, 2018, pp. 738-739). This indicates a slow process of secularisation.

As I consider the youth ministry practitioners’ responses, there would be no resistance to a line of argument to say the influence of church is decreasing but it is still a significant presence in many people’s lives. (Particularly, due to the focus of this research, with regard to those connected to the Protestant faith or Protestant community.) This suggests that Northern Ireland is not post-Christian yet, further argued in the work of Coulter (2016) and therefore different at this point in time from its United Kingdom counterparts. There was no triumphalism in the content or tone of youth practitioners, rather an admission that this culture “provides a huge opportunity” (Rick) for young people to engage with programmes.

Practitioners also recognised that this culture is in transition. “[S]ecularisation is, is increasing. I think you have to look at anything on Facebook and see any church story on the Belfast Telegraph, the comments beneath it are just so vociferous against the church” (Martin). Though in accepting these changes, the posture from practitioners was not necessarily defensive:

[Y]es, we are postmodern and increasingly we are moving into a secular generation and the role of the church and churches is diminishing and it’s maybe not a bad thing . . . and that’s, that’s where the need to learn to think as a missionary not as a minister has been very helpful and enlightening. I still might be carrying out the roles of ministry but looking at the world of young people contextually, . . . cross-culturally as a missionary, changes how you practice ministry or it certainly ought to. It has for me (Craig).

In these words of Craig, we are seeing examples of youth ministry practitioners, wrestling with the complexities of context and attempting to create a new future, as advocated by Hall:

Instead of clinging to absurd and outmoded visions of grandeur, which were never Christ's intention for his church, serious Christian communities ought now to relinquish triumphalistic dreams of majority status and influence in high places and ask themselves about the possibilities of witnessing to God's justice and love from the edges of empire which is where prophetic religion has always lived (Hall, 2010, p. 40).

Consequently, in the context and ministry interplay, practitioners have embraced the opportunities that church culture in Northern Ireland creates. There are opportunities for youth ministry to engage with young people which are not typical of the wider United Kingdom landscape. However, more than the embracing of opportunities, the style of engagement reveals a “redeeming of opportunities” as Phil advocates for, illustrating the role of relationship-building as a redemptive practice of transformation. This connects with Bailey’s work on how “practice of the practitioners evokes and reveals an embedded theology that fuels a way of life and service amongst young people”(Bailey, 2014, p. 14). This is seen, for example, in the centrality of relationships:

[R]elationships are a constructed practice for youth ministry, they are meaningful and meaning making. Relationships are meaningful because they are the *medium* of the mission and they are meaning making because they carry and communicate the faith, message and *acts* of mission of the youth minister. Consequently, relationships that function as communicative acts, so constructed as practice, become the medium, act and the message, the energy for the transmission and communication of the Gospel amongst young people (Bailey, 2014, p. 5).

The redemptive practices of transformation are seen as practitioners are embodying the gospel in their approach to and engagement with young people in a manner that prioritises relationships. For example, Pete T. shared a conversation he had with one of the young people who came to their centre, reflecting how the young person saw the youth team; “o you guys give me attention, o you guys want to have a conversation with me, . . . you guys seem to care about me, that's different to anything I've experienced before” (Pete T.).

Grant shared a similar example illustrating an appreciation these young people experienced:

[I]t's because the leaders accept us and we can come here and we feel accepted, we feel you care about us . . . listen, we know when we come down here, we don't get judged, we are accepted and that you care for us (Grant).

Thus what begins with care and compassion through the redemptive practice of transformation, in this case relationship-building, results in the transformation of these young people. Likewise, Laura E. shared a conversation with a mother of two young people who were involved with her youth ministry:

Having a conversation with her, his mum, about a year ago, saying how much she sees that he has come on, that he is so confident and even his sister, how they are confident and the opportunity they have been given through the youth work (Laura E.).

There has been much written about the relational nature of youth ministry (Root, 2006, 2007a; Smith, 2009) and indeed ministry at large (Pickard, 2010; Pickett, Barrett, Eriksson, & Kabiri, 2017; Young & Firmin, 2014), critiquing the function of these relationships and if relationships are indeed a bargaining tool or, even more seriously, a means of manipulating young people. Root (2006, 2007a) explores this, asking 'is it good?' as he sets the power of influence against the power of place

sharing. The result is to provoke thoughtful practice to help young people encounter God and not settle for simply encountering those in ministry or leadership.

However, in my desire to honour the words of these practitioners throughout this research, I have to admit this is not what I see, in motive or practice.³³ The redeeming evidence from these practitioners is not, as stated previously, a transactional task but rather a highly relational compassionate exchange. It is evident that these youth ministry practitioners are describing an intentional relational process that occurs by journeying with young people over time. It is described by Craig as “get[ing] down to the serious work of relationship” and seen in the pastoral overflow of the lifelong journey that Pete W. describes. These practitioners are choosing to invest time and build trust and share their lives with young people:

[W]ith youth ministry, there has to be this, this I'll see you, I'll be at your funeral type of thing, where there is some guys and girls that you will just going to do life with and they think that is unique in youth ministry because you then invite them into the family of faith and then you get the journey with them through that and that, that is, not a funding thing that goes beyond everything and that, that remit, that's just life, it changes things for me anyway (Pete W.).

Furthermore, for these practitioners, not only is time spent with young people how they forge their ministry, but success is measured in the impact of these relational connections. As Laura E. shares, “it's actually relationship that keeps young people and I found that over and over again . . . I didn't have a deep enough relationship with some of the young people and that's why sometimes it went where I didn't want it to go.” The relational process that youth ministry practitioners are

³³ Assessing this critique has called for a consideration to the bias I might hold as a somewhat insider to youth ministry and an increased reflexivity. Though again the methodology adopted and in particular the loop of data analysis creates a robust framework for uncovering motives and function.

describing is marked by two characteristics, longevity and network, which I would suggest creates a less transactional mode of operation, as the posture is softer and humble and is more person-centred. Longevity is seen in the motif of journey and network evidenced through the collaborative engagement with others.

As practitioners talked about what they do, it was obvious that there is a variety of people involved alongside the practitioners, illustrating the collaborative nature of this relationship-forming. As Laura E. shares, “we are a team doing this.” This sense of team was seen in connections across families; “my relationship with parents was as important as my relationship with the young people. And actually the family unit, no matter what that unit came in, shape or form that was really, really important” (Laura E.). Or as Pete T. noted,

now we are trying to work with the parents which is just massive, wee simple ways of contacting them . . . Just that journey with Mums and understanding them and if you understand them you understand the young people better and vice versa. That's huge for us. (Pete T.)

However, this networking is larger than simply with the immediate families. Rick talked of a “shared ownership” as he listed the variety of people he relates to under the banner of youth ministry, for example, the wider church, teams of volunteers, staff, interns, key leaders, community leaders, parents and young people. This is another illustration of how this church culture creates opportunities for many people within youth ministry to be involved in the lives of young people. Furthermore, as the practitioners shared, it was evident this wasn’t about their partnerships or even strategic alliances (and these did exist); it was something much more fundamental – the acknowledgement that though they might be the “point person” (Rick) there were many adults connecting with young people and this was encouraged and valued.

This invitation is not simply to a relationship with the youth practitioners, it is an invitation to a community. Pete’s W.’s example of this lifelong journey “at your

funeral type of thing” highlights an interesting dynamic of the supposed age-centric nature of youth ministry, opening up the relationship-building as a lifetime of interaction, of remaining in relationship, a lifetime of belonging. Pete W. spoke further into this idea regarding how in youth ministry we can invite young people to be part of a community that isn’t limited to specific years of life, as is in the adolescent years, but rather a lifelong community and connection, a “family of faith”. (This connection with a worshipping Christian community was echoed across practitioners’ responses.) The motifs of family, home and connected living arise throughout the data, creating an interesting link with comments earlier regarding young people and space. There is a high value on community in the attitudes that prevail in Northern Ireland, so it is perhaps not a surprise to see this in youth ministry in terms of contextual appropriateness and theological overflow. Again, this connects with the redemptive nature that extends to and involves the deliverance of a nation. As Ruether states, “God’s deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage became the paradigmatic story of redemption of the people as a whole” (Ruether, 1998, p. 15).

In fact, the collaborative process is of particular interest in connecting the nature of youth ministry with context: as these practitioners join with God, so do many others. The redeeming nature of youth ministry is not limited to a message or even an individual. The widest sense of redemption is at play here, the redemption narrative and ensuing transformation. These practitioners are agents of change as they engage with context, with community:

I always seem to go back to community no matter what, even recently I have started to think some of the lads who are struggling to fit into church and its they long for community, it’s back to that we belong to a body you know even Romans 12” (Laura E.).

This is further exemplified as Martin speaks of connecting with the city and the wider denominational community or Pete T. shares how “my role is making sure community exists and we do community well” or as Craig poses the theological

question, “Lord what are you doing in the life of this community?” Likewise, it acknowledges the liberating activity of God, continually inviting us to join with Him in His redemptive mission. This relationship-building with young people is an overflow of the personal faith of these practitioners and reflecting the ‘with God’ aspect of ministering.

In appreciating the priority of this relational process, it was interesting to see this connection with an appreciation of the impact of others on these practitioners’ lives and practice. When speaking of what has impacted their practice, youth ministry practitioners spoke highly of relationships: alongside experience and training, relationships equalled their impact on practice. Rick illustrated this when he shared “it’s been through relationship with people that I have learnt the most” and this has been echoed in the testimony of many others. For example, Phil spoke of a “minister who offered me the apprenticeship” and Pete W., spoke of a mentor “when I was younger . . . he just showed me Jesus . . . in really simple ways, attitude and then he spent time with me, so that really shaped me.” Laura E. described her personal experience of watching her Dad who was a youth leader “I watched how young people would be drawn to my Dad and what that’s about, what’s there, would watch how he would interact . . . and watch how he would talk to them.” For these youth ministry practitioners, there is an integrity of practice evident, as they foster relationships that both impact them and the young people they serve.

Therefore, it is not surprising that this ministry expresses itself through connected living. The dominant values of context partner with the personal values of the practitioners, as Calhoun argues “persons of integrity do not just act consistently with what they personally endorse; they stand up for their best judgement within a community of people trying to discover what in life is worth doing” (Banks, 2010, p. 2174). For these practitioners, their personal and professional integrity is reflected in their relational and collaborative practice and shared ownership; it is lived out in a desire to redeem all and everything. As Wijnsma states “this conception of redemption is not moralistic nor individualistic but its main focus is the cosmos being redeemed . . . ‘In Christ’ the individual believer becomes part of this great

transformation” (2011, p. 230). Redemption is about the transformation of the world.

This relational priority and practice will not be a surprise to the global youth ministry network. The role of relationships as a means of process have been well debated over recent years but what is interesting is the collaborative nature of this journeying with young people and the contextual connections. The relational dynamics existing across youth ministry reflect an honouring of the young person, a connection with community and context and process that includes or draws others in. The redemptive practices of transformation can be seen in the manner in which this relational focus is lived out, as practitioners engage with individual young people and their communities. These practitioners are embodying the gospel in their approach to and engagement with young people. They are prioritising relationships that offer a welcome, alongside the longer outworking of life together over time, and inviting many others into this relationship-forming. As the stories reveal, transformations happens. As Grant shares, “you could see the change in him . . . he's like a different guy . . . he's like a different kid” and as Laura E. recounts, “they wanted to live that out and tell people about that,” as these young people “carry on God’s redemptive mission” (Colijn, 2010, pp. 311-314).

Therefore, in summary, it is evident that youth ministry in Northern Ireland is embracing the opportunities this church culture creates for engaging with young people. The redeeming quality of youth ministry is seen in the embracing of these opportunities and the highly relational compassionate nature of this engagement that ushers in change. These are practices that carry a priority of relationship-building towards longevity, both individually and collaboratively. This showcases the dynamic nature of youth practitioners as agents of change as they work out their commitment to young people through the redemptive practices of transformation.

Now I will turn to the second distinctive characteristic, the continued fallout of the conflict. I recognise that in the Northern Ireland context, church and conflict and the connected politics have been interesting bedfellows (Barnes, 2005; Bruce, 1986;

Mitchell, 2006; Sandal, 2017) and as such have interlocking connections and influences.³⁴ The second significant area regarding context in Northern Ireland is emerging identities in a post-conflict age. Again, throughout this section, I will uncover the dominant contextual influences and illustrate throughout how youth ministry engages or responds, twin-tracking issues of context with the ministry response through the redemptive practices of transformation. Furthermore youth ministry, in its engagement with a society impacted by the Troubles, reflects a liberation that acknowledges the complexity of life for young people and their communities across Northern Ireland.

The impact of the conflict in Northern Ireland – emerging identities

Aware of the back catalogue of research in Northern Ireland, particularly associated with the Troubles, I was hopeful that this piece of research would bring a viewpoint that connected with Mitchell and Ganiel's picture of life in the ordinary, as opposed to life overshadowed by the conflict. As this duo write about their own intervention, "[o]ur focus on everyday life reflects what is actually on evangelical minds now in Northern Ireland. This is the first essential step in broadening the debate about religion in Northern Ireland beyond the parameters of a predominantly Troubles-focused literature" (Mitchell & Ganiel, 2011, p. 188). As such, I was determined to take this role in uncovering seriously and push into both my personal and cultural assumptions around the language and labels we use to describe and possibly shorthand communication.³⁵ Thus, I found emerging identities a more accurate

³⁴ Recent research has begun to present a more nuanced picture of the role of religion "in Northern Ireland . . . Mitchell . . . arg[ues] 'that religion in Northern Ireland derives social and political significance from five overlapping dimensions. These include the relationship between the churches and political power (for instance, their relationships with nationalist and unionist politicians); the role of religion as the dominant ethnic marker; the role of religion in the construction of opposing communities (through religious rituals and social networks); the relationship between religious 'ideologies' and the construction of boundaries; and the relationship between theology and politics (which is important only for fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants)'" (Ganiel & Dixon, 2008, p. 423).

³⁵ As such, highlighting the need for ongoing reflexivity throughout this research process.

descriptor for this aspect of context rather than simply post-conflict, while not negating its impact. In this section I will seek to unpack this aspect of the impact of the Troubles.

There was a recognition from the practitioners, that “teenagers are teenagers”, as both Nicole and Colleen stated: “[T]hey want to be heard, they want to be released, they want to know that you care about them . . . they want to know that they matter, that they are taken seriously,” (Colleen). “[Y]oung people still have the same aspirations they will want to be accepted, they will want to be loved no matter where they live” (Laura E.). Yet even with this acknowledgement of the similarities facing young people, I must concede the words and reflections of the practitioners connect more with the words from McAlister, Scraton, and Haydon reflecting that “the impact of the Conflict continues” (2014, p. 308). As I mentioned in the introduction, Harland’s work (2009, p. 9) referenced youth workers at the coal face, responding to young people’s needs in this deeply divided and contested society for over thirty-five years. The comments from the practitioners make this coal face connection being close to forty-five or fifty years. The sadness in this is at times overwhelming – will Northern Ireland ever escape the backdrop of the Troubles, will young people ever know anything different? Will the closing line from Leonard (2017, p. 164) “peace without reconciliation” be on continuous loop?:

[T]here are still deep ramifications and wounds, there are still 26 miles of wall in parts of Belfast and other areas, affected . . . people aren’t over it [the Troubles] yet, which then affects young people you know. So yeah, so we still are living in, we still have a lot of work to do (Pete W.).

Our past still comes, I mean the past is in every area but the past, the more recent past in Northern Ireland looks very different whereas perhaps in England we are dealing more with issues of racism, we have been dealing with issues of sectarianism and that still stays with us to varying degrees and again that varies from local area to local area but that goes deep (Craig).

I cannot ignore the significance of the conflict and post-conflict era for the young people these practitioners are working with. “While often regarded as a post-conflict generation, segregation and polarisation remain features of teenagers’ everyday lives and the political landscape” (McKnight & Schubotz, 2017, p. 216). Even in these times labelled as post-conflict, the impact continues and young people not even born during the Troubles continue to live in the fallout. As Laura E. says, “culture plays a big, big part” and the conflict has become embedded into our culture.

One of the clear impacts of the conflict is evident with regard to identity, both in its formation and in its self-categorisation. Identity formation is crucial in the adolescent years, however, more than this, the impact of the Troubles, the ongoing sectarianism and political tension, is creating a particular dynamic with regard to identity development. Pete T. highlighted these issues in his interview, “identity is an issue across the board with everybody but particularly for young people” and he illustrates this through the enforced culture of Protestantism and insular nature of these communities, which can lead to a lack of tolerance and the genuine fear of ‘the other side’. The participants acknowledged the faith repercussions as young people experience confusion in comprehending who God is, when they don’t even understand who they are.

Towards the end of this section I will return to Pete T.’s example of how he is responding to these issues. However, for now I acknowledge that his work illustrates how youth ministry is actively recognising the challenges of identity formation in the lives of young people and as such seeks to not simply spiritualise but draw connections between the core of who we are and the call of faith. As young people ask questions about who they are, youth ministry practitioners allow space for them to wrestle with this, and from here they can build on their understanding of themselves and of God. As Pete T. recognises, however, this takes a nuanced viewpoint. These little redemptive practices of transformation exemplify the integrative nature of youth ministry that embraces the whole life of a young person; practices of patience; practices through programmes that take time to help

young people understand who they are; practices that create space to think, question and learn.

The work of White and Wyn (2013) and Wyn and White (1997) has been particularly helpful as their ideas around cultural formation and social identity move the conversation towards identifying the dominant ideologies at both a national and personal level:³⁶

The sets of relationships that young people have with family and friends; in institutions such as school and in workplaces; as well as wider economic conditions and cultural traditions, all contribute to making identities. This means that as social conditions and circumstances change both locally and globally, new patterns of youth identities are formed (White & Wyn, 2013, p. 177).

There is much written within the field of youth identities and formation (Côté, 2014, Furlong, 2009, 2013, Wyn & White, 1997) and of particular note is the work of Côté (2009), Daiute (2009) and Heinz (2009). Identity formation has gained much scrutiny in recent years with two main strands of thought emerging. First, there is identity as development, deriving from the work of Erikson, connecting with the physical maturation process and once identity is formed it is both enduring and singular. The second perspective sees identity as the construction of selfhood, drawing on the work of Butler, Davies, and Hopkin; identity exists only at the point of action, thus identity is not seen as sameness but rather individuals can perform different identities in different settings, and identity is constantly being formed and reformed throughout life (White & Wyn, 2013, pp. 178-179). There is, however, an acceptance of the significance of adolescence in identity construction (Furlong, 2013; White & Wyn, 2013).

³⁶ "Social identity is negotiated in the context of family and social institutions" (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 73). "[C]ultural formation is an active process which involves the participation of young people, and which marks out different relationships to the dominant ideologies and values of society" (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 73).

Furlongs' writing (2009, 2013) recognises that the different experiences of young people impact identity formation, for example, race, ethnicity and class and as such young people's identities are "complex, negotiated and multi-faceted" (Furlong, 2013, p. 136).³⁷ This is echoed in the work of Heinz (2009, p. 8). We can recognise that,

social identity is constructed in the context of a series of lived experiences pertaining, in the first instance, to locality, family and community resources. Where one lives and grows up . . . has a major influence on how one literally sees the world, as well as how we directly experience things around us (Wyn & White, 1997, p. 81).

These lived experiences connect with the impact of significant others, alongside the impact of social institutions (Wyn & White, 1997), for example, connecting with the findings regarding the engagement with church identified in the previous section:

For some young people religion is a core part of their identity, shaping the way they live their lives and impacting on their beliefs and priorities . . . While young people may be willing to acknowledge affiliation to a specific religious community, membership of a religion does not necessarily imply they hold a set of inspired beliefs that form an important part of their overall identity. Indeed, religions are often cultural communities as well as communities of belief and people may even attend religious services or participate in religious rituals without necessarily subscribing to the core tenets of their church (Furlong, 2009, p. 139).

³⁷ "Kroger argues that the social context does not have a unitary impact on young people, even if it is fragmented, and that claim is based on the confusion between the structure of identity (which involves of continuity of functioning) and the content of identity (which includes social identities of race, class, gender and so forth)" (Côté, 2009, p. 381). This connects with the hotly contested structure versus agency debate which is integral to the formation of identity (Côté, 2014).

Furthermore, there is a connection with Daiute's work on young people and armed conflict. This research highlights the

importance of meaning making about armed conflict, not only among those directly involved but also among post-war generations who often suffer from a 'conspiracy of silence' and denial caused . . . [and the] broader political-historical systems that create rationales, actions and stories of conflict and peace (Daiute, 2009, p. 325-326).

As Nicole says "there's a lot of history here that has been handed down through generations" as the stories of conflict and history are told and retold.

Muldoon, Cassidy and McCullough's research (2009) also noted the impact on deprived areas with experience of conflict-related events and that often adults are not accurate judges of the stress of such events in childhood. Muldoon et al.'s recognition of the two major religious groups in Northern Ireland as two different ethnic groups is helpful language, as is the labelling of the complex interplay of politics, land and religious belief. Yet this isn't straightforward as the conflict or post-conflict times have created labels that, though adopted by young people, are not necessarily owned by them as Pete T. and Colleen recognise:

[T]his whole thing of you're Protestant or you're Loyalist and that's enforced on you, so that becomes who you are but you have no understanding of what that is and they don't question because their parents don't even really have an understanding of what it is (Pete T.).

[A] massive thing we do come up with against is the Catholic, Protestant thing, the divide in our communities. So, I know that would be an issue, however, the generation that we have got in front of us, it's not as much of an issue as they pretend it is. 'Cause you ask them why they believe what they believe and they can't actually tell you (Colleen).

Moreover, a forced identity which is not actually understood or grasped and an identity which on the surface describes a religious affiliation is actually a political and territorial stance. As Jordan shares, “[t]oday it seems the movement is held together less by a shared theology and more by a subculture of common experience, lifestyle and practice” (2001, p. 18). This subculture is an additional complexity in identity formation in the life of a young person in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, this correlates with the work of Furey, Donnelly, Hughes, and Blaylock (2017) that recognises that,

self-categorisation and differentiation between groups does not necessarily produce social identification. Rather the subsequent development of a social identity is determined by the extent to which the in-group has been integrated into the sense of self and the self is experienced as an integral part of the in-group (Furey et al., 2017, p. 139).

Young people in Northern Ireland are caught in the tension of change; as the landscape around them is shifting, so too is their perception of themselves. Yet the research does acknowledge that “self-categorisation remains an important feature for young people in Northern Ireland” (Furey et al., 2017, p. 143). This connects with the work of Smith, who concluded that “[i]dentity is found in a relational space. Since identity is formed in the context of a community of ties and bonds, the properties of that context become salient” (Smith, 2013, p. 26). Furthermore, she recognised the refugees she studied occupied a “relationally thin identity space” (Smith, 2013, p. 23) which resonated with practitioners’ comments on Northern Ireland young people.

Together, this evidence points to the significance of emerging identities within the Northern Irish context and to simply label this as post-conflict does not fully identify with the current lived experience of young people. This opens up a more nuanced appreciation regarding the implications of the current post-conflict era for young people in Northern Ireland and also a recognition that this will vary across the country, dependent on areas and dominance of community adopted ideologies.

Youth ministry in Northern Ireland is wrestling with the common adolescent questions of identity but with the recognition of the influence this setting has on the understanding and expressions of identity, whether forced or self-categorised, whether personal or community. As such, these practitioners are indeed taking time to deal “with the “slow questions” in young people’s life journeys, questions that do not endure “fast food answers”” (Roebben, 2012, p. 192). They are engaged in a ministry that evidences the “who” and the “Whom” Dean advocates for:

The needs of adolescence are simply the needs of being human, acted out in acute ways as we try to nail down the fundamental questions of being a self: Who am I? Who are my people? Where do I belong? Why am I here? In other words, youth ministry is less about youth than it is about ministry. Jesus calls youth into mission in their own right, to take part in the divine plan to restore people to what it means to be fully human, people whose “identities” are not found, nor earned, nor made, but given.

Because identity is the focal point of adolescence, youth ministry must take seriously how the Holy Spirit works through communities of faith whose practices mark us and shape us into people whose lives bear a “family resemblance” to Jesus Christ. The most important aspect of Christianity is not “what” but “who,” which means that the same must be said for youth ministry. The panicked but oft-uttered question, what am I going to do with the youth this week? places youth ministry on the wrong theological axis. The question that must govern ministry is not *what* we do with adolescents, but *who* we are with them, and to *Whom* we point in the process (Dean, 2013).

This “who” and “Whom” aspects of youth ministry that Dean refers to emerged clearly, as the stories and comments from the practitioners revealed an integrity of character and practice from the youth ministry practitioners and connect with comments from the previous chapter regarding the importance of the “with God”

aspect of ministering. The redemptive practices of transformation rely on the participation of God.

Practitioners' awareness of the complexity of identity formation is apparent alongside their ability to engage with this through redemptive practices of transformation, seen particularly in this creation of space for young people to explore who they are:

[E]ven when we were talking about doing, say an Alpha thing, sometimes we talk about, well, do we do a 6 week pre-Alpha, where you are looking at who are you before we start looking at who is God? Because if you don't understand who you are, (ultimately you will understand who you are if you understand whose you are) but if you have no grasp of who you are then, why are you starting to tell me about this other person, when I don't even understand myself (Pete T.).

There is also an appreciation from practitioners that the forced identity, not unusual in localities of pronounced conflict and political uprising, brings an additional complexity in the formation of adulthood. It can lead onto a "lack of tolerance to anybody who is different" (Pete T.) and an over-emphasising of place and sense of territory, owning it and being confined by it: "[O]ur kids would be massively territorial so trying to do, take them on new experiences is sometimes not easy because it's the whole fear factor" (Pete T.). This fear, this over-emphasis on place, underlines one of many urgent needs for youth ministry to engage well with place and help rewrite fresh perspectives and engagements. As Mark urges, youth ministry deals with the tough challenges:

issues of identity and understanding one another and being able to agree and disagree well and what does that look like, and what does healthy conflict look like . . . and the ability and skills to negotiate and all of that (Mark).

Practitioners are cognisant of the influence of church and the Troubles, creating both opportunities for ministry alongside the need for a deep appreciation of the life of each young person. They are aware that Northern Ireland is in the middle of a significant stage in its development with the decrease in the influence of the church and increase in sectarianism. It is a country in transition, which creates a dynamic context in which to minister with young people, who by very nature of adolescence, are a people in transition:

[T]he post-conflict society that we are now in, brings with it very unique challenges . . . I think for a long time the church [was] kinda of guilty of disengaging through the conflict and so we are in this tricky position of trying to re-engage (Mark).

Or, as Craig reflects,

[W]e need to wrestle [with] the big challenges in our society, we need to tackle sectarianism, the church for too long as been part of that problem and that's why, where young people see lots and lots of Christian groups, it's almost as sectarian within the church, well then, I don't want that. What does it mean to be biblically tolerant? So, to define tolerance not through western secular liberalism what is a biblical tolerance? What does it really mean to love your neighbour? What does it mean to be able to teach our young people, what it means to engage in debate that actually disagreeing with someone does not mean you hate them (Craig).

Moreover, this ministry engages with the complexity of the intertwining of politics, religion and culture and seeks to offer different ways to live, think and interact. It offers redemptive practices of transformation that impact the young people and ripple into impacting the communities, and these practices are evidenced through the creation of space for young people to wrestle with their questions.

Furthermore, they usher in a fresh perspective with regard to identity, one that doesn't disregard the contemporary issues and influences on identity. For these

practitioners the transforming liberation of the young people is the ultimate goal. As Nicole acknowledges, youth ministry provides “a unique setting as being available and present in young people lives throughout massive changes” (Nicole). The practices of transformation are often unhurried and unfold over months and years as Nicole recounts:

[A]nother girl who emailed me at the end of a year to say I have become a Christian this year . . . she couldn't pick a specific date or time or talk or programme where she became a Christian in but she . . . was realising that through everything that she had invested herself in . . . when she looked back on who she was a year ago she realised that there had been a massive change on her life (Nicole).

There is one story told by Colleen that encapsulates the many stories and mini-narratives shared by these practitioners. This longer story illustrates much of the lived tension of relationship-building and contextual forces in youth ministry. In this example, we can see this deep love that youth ministry practitioners have for young people and a desire to see them flourish in life with God, alongside recognising the complexity of community and family pressures yet with an overriding desire to see God work. It's desire that takes patience and an acknowledgment of the need to partner with God:

We have this one kid and I can't say his name but he actually, we were praying for him to start coming along 'cause he is quite notorious in our community and he is quite easily recognised. We were praying and asking God to give us him if you will and then the next week he showed up outside one of our environments and I was “I've got him and I don't know what to do with him Lord” but he came in and his parents would be really high up in the paramilitaries in our town and he was just pushing every single button he could. Testing his boundaries with us also trying to establish this relationship, could he trust us, ahem how quickly would we throw him out and just poking a little and I love that, it's a challenge for me. So he came

along we stayed with him even when he would swear at our leaders or spit in their face, we tried to teach him boundaries with in that . . . He would sit in a small group, kinda listen but not listen and kick up a fuss. Anyway, this went on for weeks and then one week he just, one of our leaders asked him is there anything he would like prayer for and one week he said yeah, when I am 16 I have to join in, I have to swear in,³⁸ and I don't want to be part of it. 'I can't not' he knows, he lives with the head,³⁹ he knew that wasn't an option but he said, I know I don't want that life so we got to pray with him. And just, I think for him that was a moment of watch how we reacted to that, did we treat him differently now we knew and we just went on the journey with him and just every time it was grace and every time it was open to chat and stuff and then about three weeks after that he, we were out the front for the end of one of our environments and one of my interns was there, he had this crew of boys in the middle of the car park and he just separated off from his crew and walked across the car park and stood there and said "I've gotta get right with Jesus" and someone else from his crew just followed and they just bowed their heads in the middle of the car park and gave their lives to Jesus. Most incredible thing. I love that and that's transformation, that's spiritual, that's life in its fullness but also life in its fullness is taking care of the whole person, it's not just leaving him there in that situation and so straight away the big thing God taught me also in the last year, I wanted behaviour modification with him, so I wanted him to stop swearing and all of that but God was like, I'm doing something way more than behaviour modification Colleen and it might take longer and it might not work the way you want it to. So he still swore but the next week he brought his friend and he gave his life to Jesus you know it was this crazy messy youth ministry, our youth movement is messier than, we call it the glorious mess around here, that's our nickname for it. It's the glorious mess, 'cause its glorious but it's so messy ahem and then actually the most exciting thing, he connected in, he stuck with us, and then about two months ago he

³⁸ This refers to the process of joining a local paramilitary group.

³⁹ The father of this teenager is in charge of this paramilitary group.

came to me, he was turning 16 and he asked if he could join our leadership team and start being involved and helping run events instead of joining his paramilitary group so . . . that for me was like he met Jesus, but it just didn't stop there, God called him to be transformed, knowing his value, in school he has done way better, got kicked out of his previous school and so just seeing transformation as a whole, that's the kingdom (Colleen).

This story opens up various aspects of the practice and nature of youth ministry. From the start we see the metanarrative at play, the God story, expressed in the practice of prayer and faith and the ongoing relationship of the practitioner with God. This is then coupled with a professional pastoral patience with the challenging behaviour, alongside an accessibility to the leaders, as leaders patiently build up a relationship with this young person. Notice how the young person dictates the pace of the relationship-building, as he tests boundaries, becomes more vulnerable and forms trust. The God dynamic is very much part of this, seen in the words like journey and grace and marked with moments from engaging in prayer to getting “right with Jesus” but also invading all of life; it is seen as this young person goes against community expectations and across the changes in school performance, alongside the desire to serve and lead in this new environment. This is the story of one teenager transformed, using Colleen’s words “as a whole”. The honesty and mess of this story also increases its validity. I would interject here to say the significance of this is deeply important and the community pull on the life of this teenager will remain strong and deeply influential.⁴⁰

Sectarianism, identity formation and community belonging aren’t the only ways emerging identities impact the lives of young people but they illustrate how the conflict and post-conflict state in Northern Ireland has been infused with culture and identity. Constructing identities is not unusual in the post-conflict setting as highlighted in the work of Keranen (2014), Clogg (2008) and Furey et al. (2017). Nor

⁴⁰ Linking with the work of Smith regarding the context of a community ties and bonds (Smith, 2013a) and White and Wyn regarding relational influences on identity formation (White & Wyn, 2013).

is Northern Ireland alone in its post-conflict state. There has been engagement globally across various platforms with regard to researching post-conflict areas, for example, the work of Smith (2013) with regard to refugees, or the work of Veeran and Morgan (2009) and Dwyer (2015) on post-conflict areas and young people, but that does not negate the distinctiveness of this for the young people of Northern Ireland. Neither does it negate the responsibility of youth ministry to engage with this aspect of life.

As such, it is encouraging to see these practitioners' ministries engage with this aspect of context and contemporary life in Northern Ireland. Acknowledging practitioners' awareness of the ongoing dominance of the Troubles and the post-conflict state across Northern Ireland has opened up thinking with regard to emerging identities, adding to the academic discourse and scholarship through the lens of youth ministry. Likewise, this reveals how ministry is interacting with this context, uncovering the redemptive quality of youth ministry in the practices around providing space for young people and a redemptive narrative to the nature of identity and identity formation. Moreover, in that story from Colleen included above, we see the mini practices of redemptive transformation in the prayers, the patience, the relationship-building, in the formation of trust, the gospel story itself and the community encounters. Together, these illustrate the role of these practitioners as agents of change as they work with these young people in this particular context.

Concluding comments

This chapter began by acknowledging that the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland is inspired by the faith of the practitioners and informed by Scripture. Then I suggested that an interplay exists across context and ministry, that reveals the dynamic nature of youth practitioners as agents of change, as they work out their commitment to young people through redemptive practices of transformation.

Consequently a twin-track approach was taken across this chapter, as I explored the dominant contextual influences alongside the redemptive practices of transformation.

Two distinctives of the Northern Ireland context were uncovered, as identified through the responses of the practitioners – the dominant church culture and the emerging identities forming in the post-conflict interaction of the political and religious historical backdrop, alongside current community identities, creating a mix of old and new expressions of identity. I have illustrated the impact of this on youth ministry and youth ministry's response and engagement in its context.

This discourse adds to the academy's understanding of the Northern Ireland context, allowing the often silent perspective of youth ministry to be an insightful lens with which to view context. However, it also uncovers the redemptive quality of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. This is evident not just in holding to the redemptive narrative, but in the performance of youth ministry, through the redemptive practices of transformation. Transformation is indeed a significant outcome of youth ministry, as illustrated through the stories in chapter three and now through the practices, evident as practitioners engage with context.

Furthermore, it is important to highlight the interchange across the two distinctives of context, dominant church culture and emerging identities. This interchange creates a unique culture, a culture infused with history and politics and associated conflict, a culture infused with church influence and powerful church community connections. Northern Ireland is a distinctive context, not quite post-Christian but with increasing secularisation; it is in transition, a moving, changing context. The very nature of change will bring unexpected issues. At times, this transition is described anecdotally as "behind the curve" but as I consider the context here in Northern Ireland, I find language suggesting that Northern Ireland is simply behind the rest of the United Kingdom in terms of development or social issues to be lazy. It fails to recognise the history of Northern Ireland and the culture and the context of this place. Northern Ireland is not behind any point on a curve but on a

completely different curve and surely wrestling with the distinctives of locality and human experience are at the heart of theological engagement.

It is also noteworthy that these youth ministry practitioners are aware of the uniqueness of their context. A larger sample size would allow further investigation into some of the nuanced subtleties between rural and urban areas or between interface and mixed areas but the salient distinctives have been uncovered.

Practitioners see the influences of church and politics and their interplay. They are cognisant of the foundational impact on identity and belonging for young people.

They are aware of the clashes with faith, as the church has at times failed to model authenticity and tolerance and disagreement well. Ministry is adapting to and

flowing from this context, as youth ministry practitioners work across religious and cultural divides, helping young people explore who they are and trying to find ways

to express and model faith with integrity and hope. It is encouraging to see these practitioners appreciate and engage with their context so ably. I would hope this

would inspire others involved in youth ministry to take time to study the context of their ministry and explore the distinctives, so they might better understand the

context in which they serve.

This research has revealed that youth ministry practitioners are aware of their context and also how they should be responding to their context: how practice is

indeed redeeming the opportunities that are present. These redemptive practices were evident in the embracing of opportunities in a compassionate and relational

manner. They were seen in the creation of space for young people to wrestle with questions and ushered in a fresh perspective with regard to identity that sees the

transforming liberation of the young people as the ultimate goal. These redemptive practices point to a redemptive story of Northern Irish youth ministry, woven across

the detail of this chapter and the previous one. Likewise, this work uncovers an integrity with regard to practice and praxis, as the practitioners are seeking ways to

embody the very gospel message they believe.

It is redemptive, as this ministry carries the metanarrative of the Christian faith, the story of rescue and intervention and change, reflecting not just a ministry message but a ministry way. It is redemptive as these practitioners hold young people with such value, as the changed lives of young people epitomises success in youth ministry. Furthermore, it is redemptive as this ministry engages with the intertwining of politics, religion and culture and seeks to offer different ways to live, think and interact. This idea is captured well in the words of Grant as he reflects on the future of youth ministry:

[I]t's hard right, it's a process and people will jump in at different things. It's engaging with young people in different forms, whatever forms you can engage with them and then it giving them a place where they can explore God, where faith, where they aren't judged all the time. Praying that the Holy Spirit comes and encounters them and then when they encounter Jesus and they get saved. It's giving them a platform where they have a firm foundation, roots grow, where they just don't stay in church but they go back into the messy places and in the clubs and in the schools and the sports teams and it's actually them being Jesus not youth workers and then it's them connecting their friends to different things (Grant).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

“I think it’s only whenever you are forced to reflect on some of these bigger things. it is almost a reminder of why you do what you do” (Phil).

Summary of this project

The aim of this research project was to uncover the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. It was an inquiry motivated by the confusion that seemed to exist across academia and practice. This confusion was evident in the mix of operational frameworks and the growing remit and expectations on youth ministry practitioners. Alongside this confusion was the added awareness of the lack of research regarding youth ministry in Northern Ireland. The importance of this context for youth ministry has been a significant theme throughout this inquiry, and acknowledges the uniqueness of the history in Northern Ireland with regard to the civil conflict, as well as the continuing complex religious and political identities. Subsequently this highlighted the need to explore how ministry and context interplay, to aid the understanding of youth ministry in this setting. These factors created the judicious need to take the time to uncover youth ministry practice in Northern Ireland.

Guided by the motifs of uncovering and honouring, I engaged in a qualitative research process of semi-structured interviewing and an iterative process of data analysis using a hermeneutical phenomenology approach. The process allowed me to take the time to better understand what youth ministry is and how it is understood and expressed in the Northern Irish context today. Accordingly, this process needed a conduit for this understanding, a perspective that would aid the uncovering and hence I chose to study this through the perspective of youth

ministry practitioners. Twelve youth ministry practitioners from across the evangelical Protestant sector created the backbone of this research and as a result the practitioners have proven a vital and indeed worthy medium. Thus I created a lens, through which to understand youth ministry in Northern Ireland.

Moreover, the process has allowed me to pay attention to the words and meanings of the practitioners involved, as highlighted through the emphasis on the narratives shared and the mini-narratives noticed. I have deeply appreciated the partnership of these practitioners in this inquiry. I hope the honouring of their thoughts and contribution to young people is evident in my handling of this project. Their words and ideas uncovered a richness in practice and also served to illustrate the strength of their evident reflexivity. They also actively challenged any assumptions I might hold as a fellow practitioner.

I would be remiss to not acknowledge the personal and professional gains in this process. The development as a researcher was achieved through taking time to slowly and carefully plan and execute this research project and engaging in the arduous yet rewarding task of formal inquiry. This has been a rich excavation into youth ministry, through the layers of data, analysis and ongoing theological attentiveness, accompanied with the honouring of the participants' words and ideas, which altogether has aided my growth as a theologian, academic and reflective practitioner. The outcomes have indeed exceeded expectations, revealing a depth of practice emerging from these practitioners and, in particular, an integrity of practice. Alongside revealing surprises such as the cohesion of values, I have observed the strong biblical and theological foundations within a practice that has been accused of the opposite and the ongoing impact of the conflict on this generation. Above all, this process has enhanced my practice, it has aided my understanding of youth ministry and it has provided a language and framework for practice.

I have uncovered a clarity and an integrity to youth ministry in Northern Ireland. The questions raised regarding commonality of expression and the absence or

presence of a coherent purpose and practice have been answered. Youth ministry in Northern Ireland is operating with cohesion. This is seen in the values held and the overflow into practice. There is an integrity as the faith commitment and the commitment to young people flows from the value base through to the priorities of practice. Engaging in this mode of research, which sought to value the practitioners and the ministry, has indeed uncovered the explicit nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. This research has revealed a nature that is, inspired by the faith of the practitioners and informed by Scripture and worked out in a commitment to young people through the redemptive practices of transformation, with the examples of these practitioners as agents of change evident throughout.

As I established across chapters three and four, youth ministry practice in Northern Ireland is significantly influenced by the practitioners themselves and the context in which it operates. The process uncovered the dominant values held by the practitioners, revealing their personal sense of vocation and a strong regard for the Bible. It has exposed an epistemological viewpoint that embraces a Christian world view but in particular an integrated faith and lived practice. This faith framework was evident as practitioners articulated their ministry purpose and ministry message and further illustrated the Bible as a paradigm for practice. Thus, this research revealed a self-conscious theological awareness in youth ministry, which alongside the debates concerning youth ministry's engagement with theology reveals a depth of practice.

Furthermore, this depth of practice was revealed in the rich interplay across context and ministry, unearthing a manner of youth ministry that readily engages with context, as it outworks its commitment to young people. This context is marked by the dominance of a church culture and the emerging identities arising post conflict, both of which are distinctive markers for a youth ministry context. However, of greater interest was the dynamic of the engagement. It is encouraging and inspiring to see these practitioners appreciate and engage with their context so ably, revealing a ministry that adapted to and flowed from this context as these practitioners exhibited a redeeming quality to their manner and ministry.

This redeeming quality underlined the integrity displayed throughout. These practitioners sought to integrate a practice and praxis that embodied the very gospel message they value, through their redemptive practices. Though this research relied on the words of the practitioners, it was evident it is not a ministry that relied on words but embodied the faith it values. It is faith that inspired this vocational choice, that drives a biblical engagement, resulting in a deep commitment to young people. This is a ministry that enacts its faith, it's *with God*, through the practices of redemption, creating a cohesive and integral praxis.

As I stated towards the closing of chapter four, these redemptive practices point to a redemptive story of Northern Irish youth ministry. It is redemptive, as this ministry carries the metanarrative of the Christian faith, the story of rescue and intervention and change, reflecting not just a ministry message but a ministry way. It is redemptive as these practitioners hold young people with such value, as the changed lives of young people epitomises success in youth ministry. Furthermore, it is redemptive as this ministry engages with the complexity of the intertwining of politics, religion and culture and seeks to offer different ways to live, think and interact; offering redemptive practices of transformation that impact the young people and ripple into impacting the communities.

In summary, this fresh research into youth ministry in the Northern Ireland context through the eyes of local practitioners reveals a Northern Ireland accent. It is an accent inevitably impacted by its location, carrying tones of faith and Scripture, but it is particularly recognisable in its compassionate commitment to young people. This is a group of practitioners not willing to settle for just what they see, but motivated by the Christian faith story that calls themselves and young people to a different way of living and different way to see the world. You will hear this accent as they perform redemptive practices of transformation. It is evident in the embrace of the opportunities they have with young people, through their value of and actions towards relationship-building, in the space created for young people to wrestle with the questions and challenges of contemporary living, and in their

ministry manner that is seeking the transforming liberation of young people and their communities. It is a distinctive accent, influenced by its context, however, formed by the deep embodied faith of youth ministry practitioners that is inviting young people and their communities towards transformative freedom.

Moving forward

The intent of this research has been achieved, uncovering more than I expected. This research gives an accurate understanding of contemporary youth ministry in Northern Ireland. The foundational motivational values have been uncovered. The importance of the ministry aspect to youth engagement has been underlined through these practitioners' words and perspectives, illustrating an integrity as practitioners' values, beliefs and practice work together. The significance of place has been explored, uncovering the symbiotic relationship of ministry and context. However, this thesis does not just reveal youth ministry in Northern Ireland to the academy but this research also provides a language with which to understand and to practice youth ministry.

The redemptive nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland unlocks a nuanced understanding of the centrality of faith and lived theology of youth ministry practitioners. The language of redemption creates a framework within which to explore and evaluate practice. Furthermore, I hope this language of redemption, will prompt conversations regarding the transformative work of youth ministry and direct future priorities for both youth ministry practice and the accompanying church and parachurch agencies, releasing a creativity and innovation as this practice develops.

Future areas to explore

This research is also a basis for further studies. I am deeply encouraged by the value I placed throughout on the voices of the practitioners and the interweaving of their

words and ideas. Subsequently, I am encouraged by the value practitioners hold to young people themselves and find this research signposts to the agency of young people. Youth ministry has moved in the last twenty years from a 'let us tell you' approach to 'young people participating', captured, for example, in the work of Roebben (2012), Root (2007a); (2009b) and Dean (2013). Although this study did not have the reach to investigate the perspective from young people themselves, the obvious next step would be to consider how young people perceive and participate in youth ministry. It would be an exciting endeavour to juxtapose these two perspectives, practitioner and young person, to see how they interact, if the results are similar and to further test these practices and expressions of redemption.

In fact, this research could act as an interesting case study to allow wider comparison of the nature of youth ministry and generate a conversation as to how youth ministry is impacted by context. For example, it would be possible to explore comparisons in the United Kingdom and Irish contexts and interact with the work of Philips (2018) or the recent Barna research in Ireland (Barna & Christ in Youth, 2017), or open up comparisons internationally, potentially across areas of conflict or post-conflict (Weber, 2017) or areas equally influenced by the United Kingdom and youth ministry foundations as showcased in Lukabyo's work (2016, 2019).

Further research into the nature of Catholic youth ministry in Northern Ireland or an exploration of specific communities such as the Polish community in Northern Ireland would also aid the appreciation of youth ministry expressions across the United Kingdom and in Northern Ireland in particular. I also think it would be interesting to continue to discourse with wider scholarship regarding the Northern Irish context. It would be possible to consider what further insights the lens of youth ministry might contribute and thus build on the work of chapter four with regards to dominant contextual factors. It would thus add to scholarship on Northern Ireland to include a perspective of faith and, in particular, in connection with a younger age.

Criticism could be voiced toward this thesis that it did not critique the nature of youth ministry within the Northern Irish context but the remit was to uncover, and so now with the uncovering in place, this allows for subsequent critiques and interventions. I believe firmly in this process of revelation. This research has indeed enabled the youth ministry community in Northern Ireland to “give an account of themselves . . . [and] practice what it preaches”(Graham, 2002, pp. 10-11). The uncovering process of this research was needed first, before a constructive critique can take place. The next step would be to dig deeper and press into what operant theology exists and explore what is beneath these values, drawing the findings of this research into a conversation around what is missing or even what might be the dangers or limitations of these values and frameworks. For example, Root (2007a) critiqued the dangers of the drivers of youth ministry as seen in the American fundamental evangelical scene, and equally what values or practices might need caution in the Northern Irish evangelical sector could be explored.

It would be interesting to probe further into the values that practitioners hold and excavate further into why certain values are important and the personal narrative behind them, potentially contrasting this with other forms of ministry such as church leadership or pastoral care. The personal narratives proved such a rich resource for this research project it would be interesting to research this further. I would also be interested in exploring an ethnographic study of my own engagement with youth ministry to see how this connects with the findings of this study. Such research would further increase my reflexivity and self-awareness, and for someone who is teaching youth ministry at tertiary level these skills would prove valuable partners to that endeavour.

Recommendations

I also hope that the thesis could act as a foundation on which to move into various exploratory routes of youth ministry understanding and practice and would hope that I indeed could take some of these areas forward. As Nel advocates:

Practical Theology is indeed an arena seriously trying to get the conversation going and facilitate the improvement of the communication . . . Youth ministry as a discipline within Practical Theology . . . is in a sense nothing but ministry, where we attempt to get the conversation going again: listening to the one and only unique God in Christ and talking to Him, calling Him Father (Nel, 2005, p. 13).

Therefore, one of my first actions in response to this research will be to share these findings with the youth ministry community in Northern Ireland, allowing a fuller discussion as to how they connect with the discoveries and how this work will aid their practice. I would also like to share these finding with local church leaders in Northern Ireland. I hope they will be encouraged by the findings but I also think this is an important conversation for those in leadership to engage with. I know it is often church leaders that act as gatekeepers for much of work with children and young people, so a deeper awareness of this specialism would serve both practice and strategic decision-making well.

My first recommendation would be to ask the church and the academy to accompany me in the process of honouring these practitioners and refrain from suggestions that youth ministry practitioners are not theologically informed or that youth ministry is theologically light. As I have shown, this is not true and the research has revealed a theologically thoughtful and reflective practice, expressing a deep theology of love and redemption regarding young people. However, I would hope this appreciation would not be passive. My wish is that the church, in valuing the contribution of youth ministry, will commit to investing in youth ministry in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, that the church, both members and leaders would participate in this redemptive nature of youth ministry; in particular consider how the redemptive nature interacts with our context, noting the legacy of the conflict that emerges around identity. It will thus create an opportunity for the church to care for young people but also engage with communities across the country and together with practitioners co-lead in these matters of transformation.

For those operating within youth ministry, I would recommend a few areas regarding training to enhance practice. I would suggest that as this research reveals the significance of integrity and ongoing reflexivity. This points to the importance of ongoing continued professional development and the need for practice relevant training. Training around vision, purpose and practices for youth ministry would be helpful scaffolds to enhance the community's praxis. In fact, I would say this is what moves it from practice to praxis, as well as practice that keeps prioritising reflexivity in the nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland that was rich to this research.

One area where I would strongly advocate for training is on the appreciation of context, both historical and cultural. I did not appreciate the significance of the youth work heritage in the United Kingdom before, regarding its influence on the terminology. As such, part of the legacy of this heritage is the prevalence of the term youth work as a catch-all for any engagement with young people and the potential confusion this can lead to with regard to purposes and frameworks. Interestingly, it was the article by Bert Roebben (2012), a Belgian Catholic theologian, that particularly highlighted the impact of the cultural and educational forces. I note this source as it highlights the importance of listening to voices from outside our context to aid understanding within, as well as signposting to the importance of language that accurately describes purpose. Engagement with context causes the researcher, the theologian, the practitioner, to face uncomfortable questions that context can raise. In the case of this project, I had to wrestle with the continued dominance of the impact of the conflict in the lives of young people today. The uncomfortable findings drew me as the researcher into the complex web of contemporary life, embedding the question in the reality of lived experience, which I would argue produced a rich engagement.

There is much the contextual wrestling of this thesis has exposed, including the continued need for contemporary youth ministry to get involved in peace building, the need to explore themes around belonging and community and the need to take the time to understand these through a theological lens but also through the

perspective of the young person. It is with sadness that I have had to note the ongoing impact of the Troubles for this generation, though it has motivated me to find ways to support or help the church and youth ministry in the rebuilding of this country. This is not a past issue, archived with previous government funding or church initiatives, but we must find current relevant ways to keep redeeming the emerging identities and helping our young people live in the freedom they deserve. I am hopeful that the findings of this research project will bring a contemporary perspective on the divisions affecting young people and will initiate a fresh conversation concerning peace building. In fact, I am passionate that this thesis will give me the confidence to engage in this area, as well as provide those that already are engaged with a current research to support their practice and initiatives.

The other area I would advocate for connects back to my first recommendation regarding valuing the theological awareness within youth ministry and the ongoing need for youth ministry to embrace its theological roots and theological processes. As affirmed by Nel, “Youth Ministry continuously calls for a deep theological motivation and rooting” (2018, p. 22). This research revealed a reluctance for these practitioners to see themselves as theologians, even when this contradicted practice and so a building of confidence is required. It is confidence-building rather than persuasion that is needed, as they are embracing theology and reflexivity, again revealed in this research. The centring on ministry, the *with God*, exemplifies one significant distinctive that moves these practitioners into the realm of theological attentiveness and engagement and moves the praxis of this community from youth work to youth ministry. I would hope the outcomes of this research might serve to encourage the youth ministry community in Northern Ireland as to the theological nature of their role and activity but also give some helpful language with which to talk about it.

Concluding remarks

As I close this thesis, Root captures well the revelation and call of this research: “participating in the living presence of God together” (2009b, p. 113). This confirms the need for youth ministry to value its theological awareness, its contextual home and to keep the focus on young people. I hope the discoveries of this research will aid understanding, enhance practice and stimulate further interventions. The uncovering of this research project lays strong foundations on which further reflections and research can build. Also I hope the process adopted might encourage others to also engage with a methodology that values participants’ ideas and sees the richness that research as excavation can provide. However, as the voices of the practitioners have been vital to this research it seem fitting to finish with their words. At the end of my interview with Phil, he reflected on the interview process and I think his words capture the heart of this research, taking time to uncover the nature of youth ministry so that it might enrich practice:

I think it’s only whenever you are forced to reflect on some of these bigger things. It is almost a reminder of why you do what you do, or the importance that youth ministry has . . . yes, I suppose just thinking through, yeah. I just love us to be a better Christian community that loved God’s word, that loved each other, that got into it to help each other and I hope the ministry that I am involved in provides that and does that and models that (Phil).

Appendices

APPENDIX A:



Participant Information Sheet for those invited to take part in Interviews

Northern Irish Practitioners' Understanding of Youth Ministry

You are being invited to take part in a research study that will look at nature of youth ministry in Northern Ireland from the practitioners' perspective.

I am conducting this study as part of my Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology through Chester University.

Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please do not hesitate to ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information; and please take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of this study is to have a better understanding of youth ministry in Northern Ireland. I wish to consider the viewpoints of those involved in youth ministry in N.I. and would hope the results of the research would bring a fresh perspective to the on-going conversations about the nature and future trajectory of Northern Irish youth ministry.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you are involved in youth ministry in the Northern Irish context and I would like to invite you to participate through one interview.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. During the interview you are not under any obligation to reply to any questions you feel uncomfortable answering, and you can stop and leave the interview at any time. Please feel free to contact me to discuss any questions or concerns you may have before deciding to take part.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign the consent form. This will give your consent for me (as a Doctoral Student with the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester) to contact you to arrange an interview at a time and place that is convenient to you.

At the interview, which will last approximately 60 minutes, you will be asked to talk about your experiences of and reflections on youth ministry. With your permission, the interview will be recorded, and transcribed. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript to ensure it is an accurate and faithful record of the interview.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There are no disadvantages or risks foreseen in taking part in the study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

As a practitioner you may welcome the opportunity to share and discuss your views and experiences of youth ministry. By taking part, you will be contributing to the development of the youth ministry in Northern Ireland, which to date has been an under researched area.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact:

Professor Robert E. Warner,
Executive Dean of Humanities,
University of Chester
Parkgate Road
Chester
CH1 4BJ
r.warner@chester.ac.uk
Tel. 01244 511980

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

All information, which is collected, about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential so that only the researcher carrying out the research will have access to such information. At interview, I will discuss how you would like to be identified in the transcripts (the written version of the interview) and any publications. You can be completely anonymised, or you can decide what information (such as your name, occupation, age) you would like anonymised or altered.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will be written up into the thesis as part of the requirements to complete the Doctorate in Professional Studies in Practical Theology. Extracts from your transcripts maybe used when presenting the research at conferences, and or future publications but again all details will be anonymised as you wish.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research is part of the requirements for completion of the Doctor of Professional Studies in Practical Theology at Chester University. The research is self-funded.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact:

Helen Warnock

T: 02890454806

E: hwarnock@suni.co.uk

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Appendix B:



University of
Chester

Consent form

Title of Project: Northern Irish Practitioners' Understanding of Youth Ministry

Name of Researcher: Helen Warnock

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet, dated, for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my care or legal rights being affected.
3. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

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